

**Beyond Collaboration:  
Trans-cultural journeys in the Kimberley**

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## **Statement of Sources**

This thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis by which I have qualified for or been awarded another degree or diploma.

No parts of this thesis have been submitted towards the award of any other degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgment in the main text of the thesis.

All research procedures reported in the thesis received the approval of the ACU Ethics Committee (V2010 96).

My thesis concerns collaboration, thus I have sought collaborative input from Mowanjum and Boab Network people whom I name as co-researchers.

Robert Hoskin



Figure 1: A thesis is like an Altered book

I take the thoughts of yesterday, enshrined in academic texts,  
I overlay them with the land and experiences with the people of the land.

Hopefully, something new and unexpected will arise.  
So I set out on an adventure;  
Without expectations  
Other than the writing of a thesis  
and the creation of some works of art.

## Acknowledgements

This thesis rests on the support and insights of many people – not only those who have supported me in the present, but those who have gone before. In other words, in writing about collaboration, I have experienced the benefit of collaboration in so many ways.

I acknowledge and give thanks for those at Mowanjum community who have graciously welcomed me into their life and community. My mentors such as Eddie Bear and Donny Woolagoodja have consistently supported me in this work and contributed substantially to its outcome. I describe them and many others as my co-researchers. Together we explored the nature and meaning of trans-cultural relating. But of equal or more importance, they taught me how to research within an Aboriginal community as we related to country. Their presence substantially affected the way in which my research developed and thus contributed to my final explication of the meaning and process of research.

I also acknowledge and give thanks for my supervisors, Dr Noah Riseman and Professor Shurlee Swain together with Naomi Wolfe, who is Academic Coordinator of the Jim-baa-yer Indigenous Unit at ACU. I have been extremely fortunate to have their insights, encouragement and general support in this demanding research project. They have been mindful of my needs and demonstrated the empathic approach to research, which is a major learning within my thesis. My wife Jill has given remarkable support, particularly as our personal lives have been disrupted by many and frequent trips to the Kimberley, often leaving me physically and emotionally weakened by the trips.

Members of the Boab Network, a community outreach of Floreat Uniting Church, have consistently supported this work. We have had numerous conversations, as we collaborated with Mowanjum people in their up-country journeys. I had the opportunity to discuss my findings with them, have been influenced by their insights and I have contributed to the underlying philosophy and values of the Network. I also acknowledge the support of Dr Laura Brearley who brought insight, wisdom and support when I needed it.

The eventual quality of the thesis is also dependent on those giving support as readers and critics of the presentation. Thank you to Dr Jacques Boulet, Florence Hydon, Dr Anna Alderson and Jack Hoadley, who read the work from many perspectives: academic, personal involvement and general interest. I have also been fortunate to have the critique from Suesy Circosta, an experienced artist who reviewed my *Altered books* and other visual art.



## Abstract

### **Beyond Collaboration: Trans-cultural journeys in the Kimberley**

My research/inquiry concerns trans-cultural journeys made with people from Mowanjum, an Aboriginal community in the Kimberley. These journeys provided an opportunity for me and other non-Aboriginal participants to experience land and culture in a unique way. I began with the question what is the nature and meaning of trans-cultural collaboration involving Aboriginal land. I found the concept of collaboration limiting as I and others were challenged by an Aboriginal ontology and world view. My thesis presents insights from each journey, noting the importance of relating and relationships. I sought to present an approach which took seriously the question of what it means to relate with Aboriginal people on their land, allowing this experience of relating to deconstruct my approach to life, research and relating.

My thesis presents a metaphor for inquiry which includes such *up-country* experiences as preparing the fire, foraging, cooking, sharing, moving from camp to camp and the final pre-season burn. I apply this metaphor in my gathering of data and integration as I discovered what it meant to be a guest, an ally, and to empathically relate and respond to the people and the land. These concepts are woven in my final presentation of what I call PEER: participatory, embedded, empathic response.

My inquiry thus explores a way of research with and relating to Kimberley Aboriginal people that acknowledges their relationship with the land and each other. I argue that relating and relationship is fundamental to research. I present my unique approach to research aware that each research design will be unique if it respects the needs and wishes of a particular community and its wider context.

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## Aboriginal names/terms/spellings

These historical notes contain the names and images of people who are now passed away. Any person to whom this may cause distress or offence should exercise care in reading this document.

In this thesis, I use as specific of terms as possible when referring to Indigenous peoples. This means using the specific clan names when possible, Aboriginal when referring to multiple clans in the Kimberley or mainland Australia, Indigenous or Aboriginal and Torres Islander when speaking generally about Indigenous peoples. When referring to Aboriginal (and non-Aboriginal) people who have taken part in this study, I generally use first names, but in some case use surnames when appropriate to the context. As in many parts of Australia, Aboriginal words and names have been spelt in various ways. For example, the word for the creation spirits of the Kimberley, *Wandjina*, has also been recently spelt Wanjina. The word *Worrorra* one of the groups present in the formation of Mowanjum has also been spelt Worora. For example see *Yorro Yorro* (Mowaljarlai & Malnic, 1993). I have followed a recent publication, *Mowanjum: 50 years community history* (Jebb, 2008). The Mowanjum community produced this book as an expression of their lives and culture.

With respect to the importance of Aboriginal Law, I have adopted the practice of using an upper case "L" rather than lower case. This may lead to some ambiguity as I have not distinguished between lore and law.

A glossary of key terms/names follows:

*Dambimangari Aboriginal Corporation*: Established to address the poverty, disadvantage, education, social and well-being needs of the Traditional Owners.

*Deep listening*: Is being with ourselves, each other and the land in a respectful and open way.

*Jillinga*: Female bush spirit.

*Jump-up*: The road ascent/descent from the escarpment to the valley, usually dry rocky watercourses.

*Junba*: Dances performed at public ceremonies such as the Mowanjum Festival, also known as a corroboree.

*Kardia*: A term used by Kimberley Aboriginal people to describe non-Aboriginal people.

*Lai-lai*: The active part of creation which has been referred to as the Dreaming in some trans-cultural work.

*Langgi*: The place where the *Ngarinyin Wandjina* Namarali battled the coastal *Wandjinas*.

*Rambarr*: Wife's mother.

*Traditional owner*: A descendent of the clan that occupying or that occupied a particular region of the Kimberley, particularly if recognised in Australian Law.

*Troupie*: Four-wheel drive vehicle capable carrying 8-10 people.

*Up-country*: The term up-country is used to refer to journeys in traditional lands, which for the people of Mowanjum involve substantial travel either in four-wheel drives for inland destinations or boats for coastal.

*Unguu*: The country as a living home.

*Unggud*: The people speak of their *unggud* as their spiritual connection to land and to the energy of the *Wandjina*, from their childhood.

*Wilinggin*: Is the organisation set up by *Ngarinyin* traditional owners to manage native title of substantial land in the central north Kimberley.

*Wunggurr* (also *Wunggu*, *Wunggud*, *Unggud*): The earth snakes that travelled across the country forming many places, making the rivers, waterholes and hills and, in the case of saltwater, the islands, tides, rivers and waves.

*Wandjina*: Creator spirit, rain god whose image rests in many of the caves in the Kimberley.

*Wadoyi*: One of the two Nightjar men who made the law and determine right ways for marriage.

*Worrorra*, *Wunambal* and *Ngarinyin*: The three language groups present in the formation of Mowanjum (with key *Wandjinas*, *Namarali*, *Rimijmuddu*, and *Wodjin* respectively).

*Wurnan*: An enduring law from the *Wandjina* required sharing of resources, exchange of goods, and involved an extensive trading network.

*Yalun*: (Cone Bay): Outstation on the Kimberley Coast.

## Co-researchers

The following people have been involved in the *up-country* journeys, or offered information that could assist me in understanding the significance of these journeys. They were mainly from the Mowanjum community and the Boab Network.

### Journey to Majaddin-October 2010

#### *Aboriginal*

Gordon Barunga	<i>Worrorra</i> artist
Eddie Bear	Chairman, Mowanjum Aboriginal Corporation, Traditional Owner of Majaddin- <i>Ngarinyin</i>
Matthew Martin	<i>Ngarinyin</i> singer

#### *Non-Indigenous*

Keith Bakker	Member of the Boab Network
Peter Croll	Cultural coordinator at Mowanjum Arts Centre
Ross Gobby	Coordinator of Boab Network
Libby Weeda	Member of the Boab Network

### Native Title Determination at Yalun-May 2011

*Aboriginal*-Traditional Owners of *Worrorra* lands-Wanjina Wungurr Native Title

Janet Oobagooma	Elder of Mowanjum Uniting Church
Donny Woolagoodja	Responsible for organising the event at Yalun

### Artists/children's camp at Poulton Pool-October 2011

#### *Aboriginal*

Gordon Barunga	<i>Worrorra</i> artist
Kirsty Burgu	<i>Ngarinyin</i> artist- chair of Mowanjum Arts Centre
Teresa Arianda	<i>Ngarinyin</i> artist

#### *Non-Indigenous*

Ross Gobby	Coordinator of Boab Network
Lee Anne Burnett	Member of the Boab Network
Joanna Wilkie	Art coordinator at the Mowanjum Arts Centre

### Return to Majaddin-October 2012

#### *Aboriginal*

Eddie Bear	Traditional Owner of Majaddin, Chairman of Mowanjum Aboriginal Corporation, Pastor-Assembly of God Church Derby
Marion Bear	Sister in law to Eddie Bear- <i>Bunaba</i>
Robin Dann	<i>Wilinggin</i> Ranger
Matthew Martin	<i>Wilinggin/Wunambal</i> Elder and Cultural Mentor at the Mowanjum Arts Centre, expert singer, dancer and teacher

#### *Non-Indigenous*

Sam Bayley	Coordinator of the Indigenous Protected agreement project employed by Kimberley Land Council
Katie Breckon	Curator of the Museum at the Mowanjum Arts Centre

### **Co-researchers (continued)**

Ross Gobby	Coordinator of Boab Network
Tessa McOnie	Artist, member of the Boab Network
Libby Weeda	Member of the Boab Network

### **Other participants**

#### ***Aboriginal***

Joy Morlumbun	<i>Worrorra</i> Traditional Owner
---------------	-----------------------------------

#### ***Non-Indigenous***

Norman Cameron	Former Presbyterian Minister at Old Mowanjum
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## **Acronyms**

ACU	Australian Catholic University
AIATSIS	Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies
IPA	Indigenous Protected Areas agreement
NT	Northern Territory
OASES	OASES is an acronym of the Organic integration of the Aesthetic, the Spiritual, the Ecological and the Social; OASES offers post-graduate Degrees in Sustainability and Social Change)
PAR	Participatory Action Research
PEER	Participatory Embedded Empathic Response
WA	Western Australia



**Introduction:**

**Signposts and other markers**

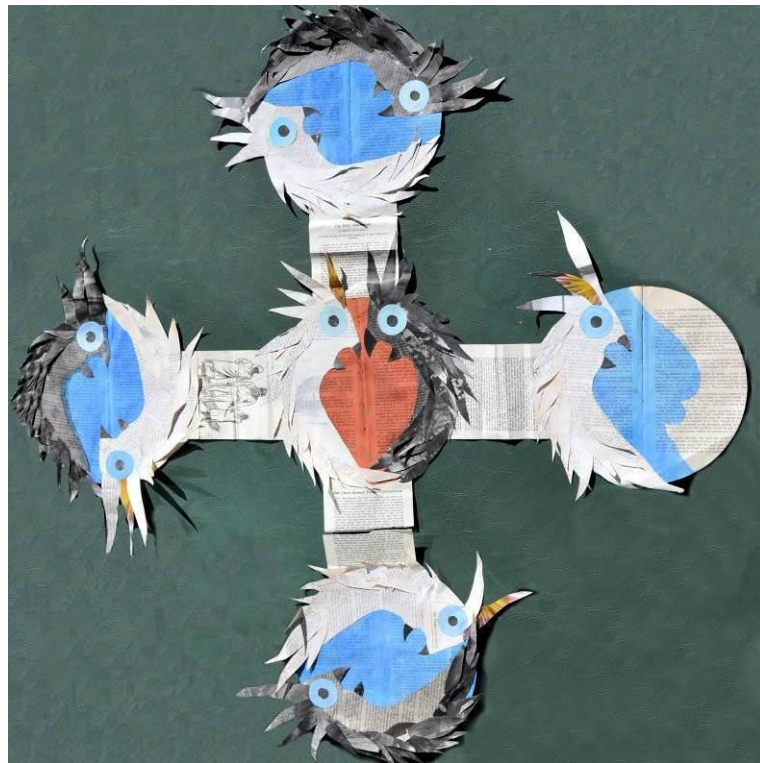


Figure 2: Where strange paths go down

## 1: A question of relating with the Mowanjum people as they encounter their lands

This is not a conventional PhD thesis. Undertaking a PhD thesis at a mature age has particular problems and opportunities not faced by the young researcher. I work with the broad canvas of a life-time of experience and thought. I began my career as an actuary in the late 1960s working for companies specialising in life assurance and superannuation, then was ordained as a minister of the Uniting Church. In this research I evaluate and critique the basis of my ontology, my philosophy of being and spirituality. I do this because I have been deeply challenged as a result of my relationship with Mowanjum, an Aboriginal community near Derby, in the Kimberley, for more than a decade.

The Aboriginal community of Mowanjum represents the joining together of three groups: the *Worrorra*, *Wunambal* and *Ngarinyin*, who traditionally occupied a substantial portion of the Western Kimberley region in Western Australia. The ontology (or understanding of what it means to be) of this people is very different from mine. They share a profound understanding of their relationship with the land in common with Indigenous communities the world over.

The Mowanjum people's ontology is relational based and centred on place, in contrast to mine which is individualist, detached from place and inseparably linked to time. I have grown up and live within an individualistic society, which assumes and affirms a separation from other individuals and from the land. The Mowanjum people live together in very close relationships, and their children move freely through different households. They see their relationship with traditional lands as of prime importance, despite the fact that they were forced to live on "foreign" soil. Their ontology and epistemology is based around the *Wandjina* and *Unggud* (see also *Wunggurr*) spirits which created their country. The *Wandjina* come in diverse forms with many names, both male and female. They are mysterious rain maker spirits, truly Other, their bodies incorporating the rains and lightning that come in the monsoons of the hot season of the year. As a non-Aboriginal person, these figures are strange and remind me that my quest is to know the unknown. The *Unggud* or *Wunggur* is that rainbow spirit that rises from the depth of the water holes. I can never know the *Wandjina* as the Aboriginal people of the Kimberley do. It is not merely part of their heritage. They are born into a land which they believe has been formed by the *Wandjina* and which the *Wandjina* continues to nurture. The first paragraph of a book celebrating the Native Title Determinations at Yalun in 2011 on the Kimberley Coast reads, "We are the people of the Wandjina Wunggurr – the creators of our land and sea country. The Wandjina Wunggurr made the Law for us and our country, which includes Uunguu, Wilinggin and Dambimangari" (Kimberley Land Council, 2011).

This thesis and my underlying approach to research may seem unfamiliar to many readers, given the emphasis on my personal experience and story with an Aboriginal community. Indeed, I may frustrate those who would seek a traditional Western research format. I have responded to the challenge of relating to the people of Mowanjum by adopting an approach which resonates with their life and cultural understanding. In this respect, story is very important. In her book *The Power of Story* Aboriginal writer Betty Pike (2010) compiles a range of Aboriginal stories together with her commentary. She begins with the words: “I firmly believe there is power in story. A culture’s mythology is its living spiritual beliefs and is born within its stories; their loss is always a moral catastrophe” (p. 1). Aboriginal scholar Esme Bamblett (2010), likewise, bases her thesis on the relationship between a traditional story and her own life story. Following their lead, I begin chapter 1 with the story of my involvement with the community of Mowanjum, to illustrate the importance of this involvement which led to the current research.

My initial research question was a meeting of two important elements: collaboration with Mowanjum people and *up-country* journeys. I thus began my research with the question: “What does it mean for Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples to collaborate on *up-country* journeys?” This question fits within action research methodology, though I had yet to understand what this might mean. I intentionally did not bring a developed non-Indigenous methodology to my research, but rather loosely recorded the journeys through personal journals and conversations. I explored the term collaboration, which emerged as members of the Boab Network shared in the organisation of *up-country* trips to traditional lands with Mowanjum families. The Boab Network is a voluntary organisation run by the Floreat All Saints’ Uniting Church in Perth established to provide community development, and children/youth programs for the Mowanjum community. I joined the Network after the 2008 Mowanjum Festival and became involved in their programs.

As I engaged with the people in their country and participated in their way of relating, the above question took on deeper meaning. I became more aware of what it meant to enter that space where Western and Aboriginal epistemologies meet. A question of action became one of being. Simply put, the question became: “What does it mean to be with the land and with those who are my hosts and custodians of the land?” In this respect I was not gathering knowledge *from* this research so much as describing and reflecting on *experience* in this trans-cultural space.

I undertook research with the following objectives:

To participate in collaborative *up-country* journeys to traditional and non-traditional lands (regions where the people have no historic connection before

colonial settlement) with the intent of listening and responding to Indigenous people;

To listen to the land and the traditional owners of the land in ways that accord with an Aboriginal understanding of *Deep Listening* that is both respectful to the people and open to their unique understanding of the land in relationship with their culture;

To record my experiences of the journeys (both before and after) using a variety of media (written, photographic and visual art), noting the relationships involved, including the participants' relationships to the land;

To reflect on and record the complex relating that exists between a church based organisation (the Boab Network), an academic research institution (Australian Catholic University/ACU) and Indigenous people, noting the tensions and difficulties that exist in researching in an Indigenous environment;

To research the collaborative relating that emerged between Mowanjum families and non-Indigenous members of the Boab Network.

My research was organic: it unfolded with the invitations that arose from Mowanjum families. My thesis begins with the story of my involvement with Mowanjum people prior to my research which led to my research question and my exploration of the nature of trans-cultural collaboration. I then wanted to frame an approach to research consistent with the people and *up-country* journeys. I did not fully understand the significance of my unique approach to research until the end of my journeys. The journeys have led to significant transformation of my ontology and epistemology. I have tried to express this in the language that I use. For example, the use of the word "trans-cultural" speaks of that in-between space between two distinct cultures. The other possible word cross-cultural hints at conflict and division in the word cross. Trans-cultural means that I enter this space conscious of an equality of relating, seeing myself as an apprentice open to the teaching of Aboriginal mentors and their families. I obviously can share my Western knowledge, but I have much to learn about relating within an Aboriginal community and context. The word "trans-cultural" also hints of the issue of translation, not merely of language, but ways of being in this often paradoxical space. Such a space is transitional and unique. In this respect, I have no wish to arrive at generalities or procedures for relating.

I share the story of four journeys and their impact on trans-cultural relating in chapters 3 to 6. These journeys challenged my conception of collaboration as I found the notion of collaboration narrow, if not inappropriate, in the face of being a guest of the people and ally in their struggle to retain their connection with land. My journeys led me to reframe my operant question and research methodology. I found that I was exploring what it meant to undertake research of the nature of our relating. This led me to reframe my research process to suit an academic audience. The reader may find this approach unusual given that the research methodology is clearly detailed in advance of the study. This, however, is the new knowing or knowledge generated by this research, namely, a trans-cultural research journey that focussed on relating as much as the responses or actions taken.

## **2. Introduction to the community of Mowanjum**

The *Worrorra*, *Wunambal* and *Ngarinyin* peoples, like other Aboriginal peoples across Australia, have experienced white-dominated power relationships with missionaries, pastoralists, police and other government and non-government officials. They have been forced to cooperate or collaborate with white institutions or individuals for diverse reasons. Mowanjum's history includes significant examples of collaboration between Indigenous/non-Indigenous people in the Kimberley. This history arises from contact with the Presbyterian Church Mission that reached out to their forebears on the Kimberley coast early in the twentieth century. It was clear in discussions with the Mowanjum people that the relationship was both creative and destructive. On the one hand, it saved many families from the disastrous consequences of "white" encroachment into the Kimberley. On the other, government, missionary and other pressures forced the people to leave their traditional lands, and they suffered from white control as did other Aboriginal people across Australia (Swain, Rose, & Australian Association for the Study of Religions, 1988).

Presbyterian missionaries began the mission to the *Worrorra* in late 1912. This followed a similar mission established further north at Pago near Kalumburu by the Benedictines (Perez, 1977). McKenzie (1969) recorded the history of the Mission beginning with its formation through to the late 1960s. The mission was established at Kunmunya after an early beginning at Port George IV. Church historian Maisie McKenzie writes that the Presbyterians, in contrast with the Benedictines, had the goal of preparing the people for integration in wider Australian society. By 1926 there was serious consideration to close it down. However, the Rev J.R.B. Love and his wife Margaret brought new energy to the Mission from 24 August 1927 until their departure in 1940 (McKenzie, 1969, pp. 87, 156). During their time significant leaders emerged including Njimandum, Albert Barunga and Alan Mungulu. However, the Mission went through a series of

dramatic changes. In 1947 the Western Australian government approached the Presbyterian Church to take over the government ration station at Munja. This led to the formation of a new mission at Wotjulum further down the coast toward Derby. In 1951, families from Kunmunya and Munja moved to Wotjulum (p. 175). The move lasted five years before the people were moved again to Old Mowanjum outside of Derby by mid-November 1956 (p. 209).

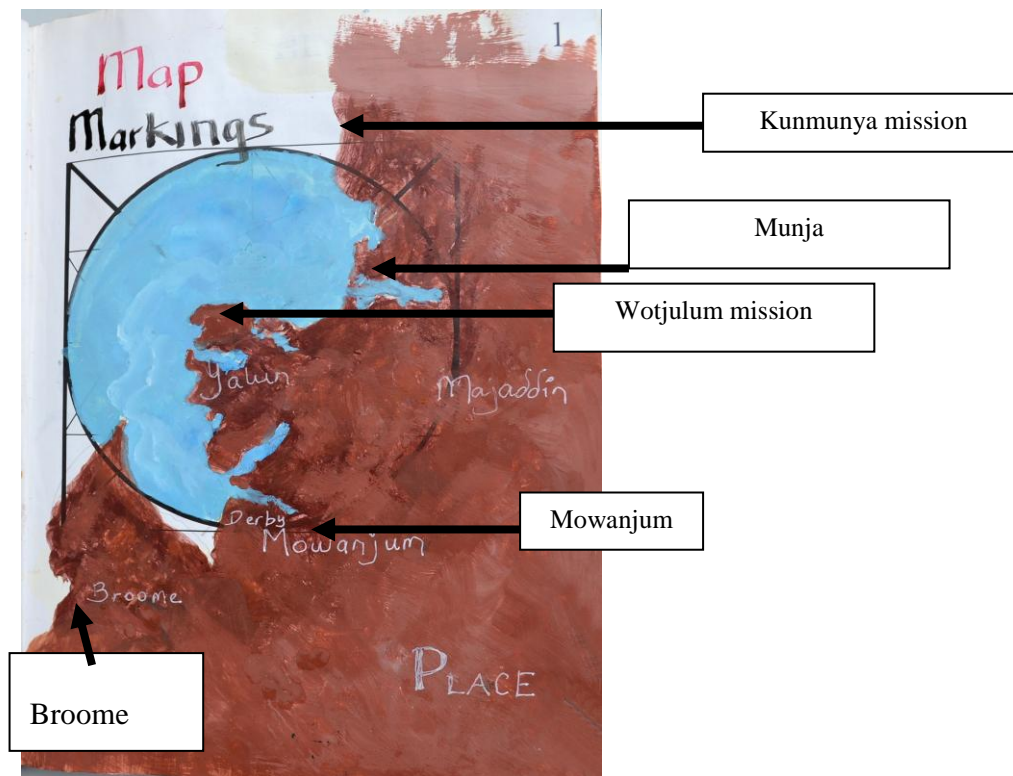


Figure 3: Map of the West Kimberley showing moves from Kunmunya to Derby

McKenzie (1969) gives a balanced and respectful account of this long history from the mission's formation to the move to Mowanjum. For example, she includes chapters on key Elders such as Njimandum and his two children Elkin and Alan (Mungulu), then Albert Barunga. These chapters are detailed and indicate that Aboriginal men and women were valued by mission staff as significant people in their own right. Such figures as Njimandum, sat "astride two worlds" retaining his "tribal" identity and yet integrated into a new way of life (pp. 105-121).

McKenzie also notes that the fifty year collaboration between the three groups and the missionaries was essentially to prepare the people for integration within white society. She states that the "careful policy of integration pursued by the Mission throughout its history has not been easy" (p. 283). This policy challenged both State and Federal governments' approaches to assimilation, a policy which denied Aboriginal identity and way of life. Ian Crawford (2001) notes that the church and Aboriginal residents could expect little support from the government when the prevailing policy was assimilation and not supportive of isolated and independent communities (p.

194). The people were consulted about the move, but the attraction of education and work prevailed. They reluctantly gave up their access to traditional coastal lands and moved to the town of Derby. According to a transcript of Albert Barunga's words, Wotjulum had failed and the young people wanted to live near Derby. David Mowaljarlai suggested the name Mowanjum meaning "settled at last" (Jebb, 2008, p. 92). Together, the three groups who formed Mowanjum might be called the *Wandjina* peoples, given the role their major *Wandjinas* (*Rimijmuddu*, *Namarali* and *Wodjin* respectively) played in their lives. But a yearning for a return to their lands continues this present day.

In 1972 the Mowanjum community became an incorporated body with a nominated council of Elders. Thus began an era of "self-determination", but ironically Old Mowanjum remained at the mercy of government action. In the mid-1970s, the people were informed that the West Australian government wanted to extend the runway in the Derby Airport. They were forced to move again to a new site on the Gibb River Road, and a new Mowanjum opened in December 1980. The runway was never enlarged. The church at Old Mowanjum literally just vanished and with it the spectacular *Wandjina* paintings which were painted on the rear wall of the church. This era of self-determination did not sit well with the prevailing assimilationist notion of an Australian way of life at that time, which, according to historian Anna Haebich (2008), assumed a homogenous society built on the image of a good citizen and happy family (p. 93). Haebich writes of the official version of this concept as emphasising "lifestyle, family home ownership, suburban living, mateship and a fair go for all" (p. 94).

The Ecumenical Institute from Chicago were also involved with Mowanjum in the early 1970s and fostered a "black power" ideology (based upon the 1960s and 1970s Black Power and civil rights movements). A former Presbyterian Minister at Mowanjum, Jonathan Barker, remembers a conversation of a colleague, Ron Denham, with the Derby Town Clerk, who had written an article on the front page of *The Western Australian*: "Is there Black Power in Derby?" The officer replied, "There's a new lifting of heads and squaring of the shoulders of the Mowanjum Aborigines and the people of Derby don't like it" (Barker, 2013).

Contemporary historical accounts obviously reflect the change from a view of history written predominantly from the perspective of white people to that of Aboriginal people. Historian Mary Anne Jebb (2002) records an historical account of the Kimberley's pastoral history and outlines the complex collaborative relationships that were imposed upon and/or created with the people. Families from Mowanjum including the Bear and the Barunga families, some of whom are my key dialogue partners, have a history of engagement with the white controlled pastoral

stations. Jebb's history includes the subjection of the people, their collaboration with their "enemies", the creation of a working relationship that broke down barriers between Aboriginal and *kardia*, and the continuance of the prejudice of the past.

### 3. The problem of presenting multi-dimensional research in a two dimensional framework

As my research is guided by Aboriginal approaches and methodology, I face the issue of presenting a multi-dimensional field of research in a linear two dimensional format of a thesis. In Kimberley Aboriginal culture, knowledge was and is spread over the land, and held in stories, songs and artworks embedded in particular landscapes. In the past (and sometimes in the present) anthropologists would transpose this knowledge into a two dimensional framework, missing its multi-dimensional nature. This Western approach to knowledge, usually centred around words, is problematic and unable to encapsulate the richness of Aboriginal knowledge and culture. The collection of Aboriginal knowledge and cultural practice seemed analogous with collecting dead fauna and flora for storage in Western intellectual museums. My thesis is the compilation of a number of layers of text and visual content; some of these are discrete such as records of conversations or inner reflections, and others are linked across chapters such as history or anthropological references. I use different texts and presentations of text to mark the different kinds of material: poetic/dream, visual imagery, narrations, theory, conversations and story. I also include several artistic works to accompany the written thesis. The **CD** that accompanies this thesis presents my two **Altered Books** in a digital form, together with short prose as a commentary on the images.

My research was guided by Aboriginal approaches and methodology. I therefore included visual imagery and performance in my process. I began my research with an image to symbolise the various conversations that I was having concerning land. To do this, I prepared an altered book based on a book called 'Where strange paths go down' (Duncan-Kemp, 1952). The book by Duncan-Kemp was selected as it reflects its colonialist setting and therefore was withdrawn from the Box Hill Library. I physically deconstructed the book, symbolic of my intention to deconstruct past attitudes and assumptions regarding Aboriginal people. I tore out pages, cut them up and shaped the pages to reflect my own journey. My process was therefore to take past work, usually written, deconstruct it, and bring it into being a new understanding and relationship with the disassembled pieces. The colonialist attitudes underlying past research into Aboriginal communities and culture certainly require disassembling because contemporary research should



operate with a new paradigm. This thesis is an exploration of such a paradigm and approach to research.

I used this reassembled book in my proposal to the University's confirmation seminar (figure 2). I laid the book out on the ground to illustrate conversations that would take place around the issue of traditional lands. I used the symbol of the cockatoo to illustrate these conversations. I had explored this symbol of cockatoo in many ways in my visual arts work in a Bachelor of Visual Art and Design course at ACU and made a sculpture of *Cocky*, taking him with me to the Kimberley. The viewer will notice that there are two cockatoos in the altered book, one black and one white. When I think of the black cockatoo, I think of a conversation that I had witnessed where a *Worrorra* Elder had stood up for his cultural concerns in the face of "white" criticism. The image of a white cocky in relationship with a black cocky symbolises the many conversations which I engaged in and read about. I began to "play" with their relationship to each other, noting that the cockatoos take different positions to each other in each of the conversations. In the centre circle, I placed the black cocky opposite the white cocky on a bed of red ochre to symbolise the land. The two are in relation to each other as one possibility of being together equally sharing power on the land. However, not all relating is equal. For example, in the history of Black/white relationships in the Kimberley, white people and their interests have often dominated. In visual terms, the white cocky clearly tried to dominate the black cocky and expected him to take a submissive pose. I had no intention of repeating this arrogant and racist approach, but rather worked for equal power in my relating, noting any innate tendency I had to do otherwise. Indeed, when we were guests on traditional lands, Mowanjum people clearly were in control and we, the non-Indigenous, were reliant on their skills.

In Figure 2, each circle symbolises an important part of the journey, in particular the changing relationship between the black (Indigenous) and white (non-Indigenous) cockies. This relationship is described at the beginning of each chapter of the thesis. In chapter 1 I explore the meeting of the two: the Mowanjum people with whom I collaborated in the annual Mowanjum Festival and their hosting me to experience their traditional lands. This meeting led to the research question: what does trans-cultural collaboration mean *up-country*? In chapter 2, I give prominence in my methodological approach to a metaphor derived from my relating with the people of Mowanjum as well as Indigenous research in general. Chapter 3 explores what it meant to be invited to experience traditional lands as a guest in October 2010. This raised substantial issues for collaboration, a limited word in relationship to this journey and journeys to follow. I was invited in May 2011 to take part in a native title determination on the Kimberley coast which raised the question of what it meant to be an ally (chapter 4). Later that year, I was part of a trans-

cultural collaboration at Poulton Pool in the Kimberley. I learnt the importance of being and learning with the people as they related to country, again challenging my understanding of collaboration (chapter 5).

This thesis thus begins with the story of my meeting and collaboration with people from Mowanjum and continues with interplay between my experience and theory. The reader may find this approach disconcerting, as dissertations generally begin with the research question clearly defined from extensive reading. This initial discussion is generally followed by a recognisable research methodology. In this thesis, I leave this discussion to my final chapters (6 and 7), where I explore my research in the context of Participatory Action Research methodology (PAR). I present a refinement of this approach pertinent to my own research journeys. As I particularly focussed on what it meant to relate to the people and their lands, I summarised this under the heading PEER: participatory, embedded, empathic response. I argue that this approach recognises the unique issues involved in relating to Kimberley Aboriginal people, given my long term relationship with them. It was therefore important to bring an approach to research which enabled this organic emergence to occur in its own time and way. Although inquiry resonates with PAR, my approach is responsive rather than initiatory. For example, I sought guidance and direction of key Mowanjum Elders waiting on their invitation to take part in the various journeys. In a real sense they determined the nature of my inquiry and its outcome.

# Chapter 1:

## Kimberley walkabout



Figure 4: Black and white Cocky on the Kimberley land

## 1.1 Introduction

My research arises from a decade of relating with the people of Mowanjum as I assisted them with their annual arts and culture festival. I saw this relationship in symbolic terms as the meeting between a white and black cockatoo on Kimberley soil (figure 4). Red was the natural colour for this iron rich land. During my annual trips to help with the Mowanjum Festival, I saw this engagement as a meeting between friends. We worked collaboratively to present the festival. I was also privileged to be taken around country as they affirmed their unique relationship with traditional lands.



Figure 5: Collaboration *up-country*

In this chapter, I share the story of my involvement in and with the Mowanjum community (sections 1.2-1.5). I share this story because this involvement led me to ask the question: “What does it mean to collaborate with Mowanjum families as they journeyed *up-country*?” These journeys occur within a borderland or contact zone between two different cultures and can be subject to trans-cultural tension and the effects of a problematic history (section 1.6). Together with members of the Boab Network I sought to collaborate with Mowanjum people as they engaged the land. With this in mind, I explore the meaning of “collaboration” in general and in Kimberley trans-cultural relating (sections 1.7-1.12). I argue that the possibility and nature of collaboration has to take account of the wider story and context of the

individuals and communities involved in the process. Although my thesis revolves around the question of collaboration, I remain uneasy with using this word because it is a Western oriented word which primarily focuses on the work to be achieved rather than the way in which it is achieved. With this in mind, the focus of my thesis is on the nature of collaborative relating rather than on the product of the collaboration.

## **1.2 The beginning of a trans-cultural relationship**

My interest in Mowanjum began when I met *Ngarinyin* Elder David Mowaljarlai (now deceased) in the late 1990s. Mowaljarlai led a seminar at Melbourne University in which he explained the significance of land. He asked us to sit in a geographical spread, that is to organise ourselves according to the place we came from in relation to the university. I had no idea at that time how important this simple exercise might become for my work and involvement with the people. This exercise demonstrated the unique and fundamental relationship between place and life within an Aboriginal community and culture. My interest in Mowanjum developed further when I met *Worrorra* Elder and artist Donny Woolagoodja at Derby and later when Donny and others came to Melbourne in 2001. Being conscious of wanting to engage with the people of Mowanjum, I asked Donny in 2001 if I could stay at Mowanjum. I also suggested that I might write something in the future with their permission. Donny agreed with both the request to stay and the suggestion to write. Thus began a relationship which has grown and developed over the past decade, with many crossings, many encounters and many returns to integrate what I have learned with my life in Victoria.

## **1.3 My initial encounters with the people of Mowanjum**

I followed up my conversation with Donny by travelling to the Kimberley in 2002. In my initial visits to Mowanjum, the community hall was the focal point of the community's art and culture. The walls were covered in *Wandjinas* and other images from their cultural heritage. I entered the hall as a stranger looking for a way to assist in the Mowanjum Art and Culture Festival about to take place. I was quickly invited to help with the preparations – to join an ongoing collaboration as Indigenous and non-Indigenous people worked together to present the event. I found it a pleasure to work in the midst of the hall, surrounded by the *Wandjinas* and the women of Mowanjum as they applied themselves to the task of painting. It was a privilege to participate in their community and culture in the many levels described below. I experienced the hospitality that underlay Indigenous/non-Indigenous collaborative relating, which I would later explore in my research.

I worked in the old Art Centre, helping to frame art, assisting in the gallery and supervising the repair of the totems used in the festival. I worked near the Aboriginal women artists who spice painting with conversation and laughter. It is a community occasion, as people celebrate being together just as much as the opportunity to paint their profound *Wandjinas*. The longer I stayed in the community hall the more I began to let go of my city mentality and to collapse into another realm. The *Wandjina*'s power stirred within me. In the evenings I engaged in some deep conversations, feeling like a friend rather than a stranger in this community. I was fortunate to continue to spend time with the women as they prepared their special totems for the upcoming corroboree. I joined with them to weave totems made of wool and wood. We constructed a number of wooden frames representing the central *Wandjinas* and also canoes. They spent many hours winding the wool around the totems in preparation for the dance. I joined in helping to make small crosses for the children to carry. Thus began many years of making and repairing the totems used in the festival. With each experience, I found myself drawn deeper into the life and culture of the people and closer to the time when I would need to do my own weaving. I would weave a thesis, exploring the complex and dynamic interaction I had experienced. Helping with the festival would be only a small part of my work, which also included leading worship for the small Mowanjum Uniting Church congregation, writing a family story and often being drawn into cultural issues.

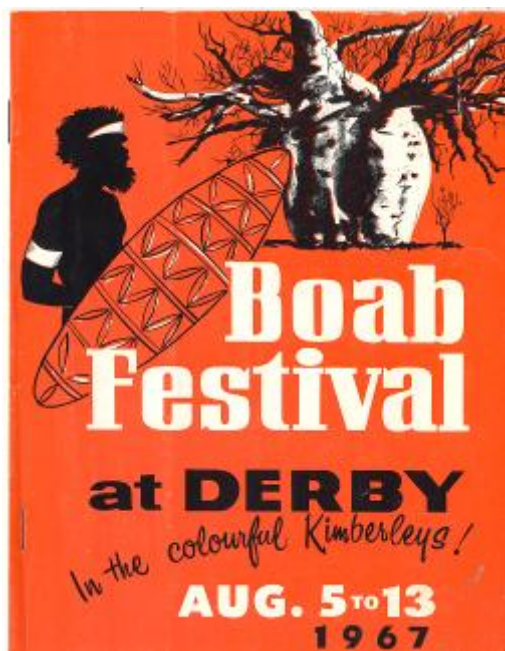


Figure 6: Page from the Shire's Boab Festival leaflet of 1967.

The Mowanjum Festival is an offshoot from the people's participation since 1961 in the Derby Boab Festival. Early on the people had reluctantly performed in Derby at the Boab Festival on the Sunday night, but then when the organisers did not accede to their request to change their day, they organised a corroboree in Mowanjum (McKenzie, 1969, p. 256). Being a mission, they were concerned with a Sunday performance which conflicted with their Christian beliefs. The West Kimberley/Derby Shire subsequently changed their approach and the people participated in the wider Boab Festival. The Mowanjum people initiated their own festival in 1998 as an event within the Boab Festival. In the early years the Mowanjum Festival was a two day trans-cultural interaction which included visiting

guests from Guinea, West Africa, New Zealand and a range of stores selling trinkets and other carnival types of goods. In later years it became a single day event concentrating on Aboriginal culture without the stalls. This change seems more in keeping with the wishes of the people. My first festival in 2002 was extremely memorable and serves as an example of the importance of culture. Donny and I gathered the boys (aged eight to fourteen years) for what was to be a very special time. The children ran alongside and two of the smaller boys took my hands, as we led them to the place of preparation. The first task was to make headbands of red wool and to wind them around the young black foreheads. This done, we took them to Donny's daughter's house, where the Elders were waiting. I watched as the older men of the community lovingly and respectfully covered the boys in red ochre. The male touch is important and signified a deep and lasting bond between the men and boys. Then they took the white paint and anointed these young warriors with the markings of the clan. The boys were dressed with red loincloths and arm bands. The boys then charged through the long grass as if responding to an ancient call to be the hunters that they could become in the future.

Roger Burgu (now deceased) introduced the *junba*, a prominent feature of the festival. He told a story of the two night birds and the Laws that stem from their stories. I found his introduction moving and informative. Roger, an artist and cultural leader of the community, was also a pastor of the Uniting Church. He was a man of deep faith and commitment who was able to preserve the unity between his faith and his culture.

I watched as the two dancers carried totems with images of birds as the women sang in the background accompanied by clap sticks. The crowd was taken into another dimension. For a few minutes the games and stalls lost their significance and the *Wandjinas* came alive before us. The two fires burnt bright, casting shadows on the dancers as they wove their spell. The women and children followed as the dancers progressed and were led into the coming together of the three language groups represented in the dances. The dance proceeded with various songs from country, leading to its natural conclusion. I was left to wonder about the future. I saw the old men fade in the firelight, and the young wander alone. Who would guide them in the new day? Would these old songs and dances drift as smoke in mists of time? Or would a new leadership emerge to honour the language and to protect the culture against the ravages of time? In the meantime, I felt that it was important to give the festival my complete support. I ceased to be a spectator, walking behind Donny and others, but instead took an active role in its organisation. For two or three years, I sat next to Roger and together we compared and explained the meaning of the *junbas* (dances). As noted by Donny Woolagoodja, who is the owner of several of his father's dances, the older men were given *junbas* by the *Wandjina*. As Donny explains, in the days before



colonisation, the people decorated their bodies and created dance totems with local materials. Now they use woollen strings, ply wood and other European materials (Blundell & Woolagoodja, 2005, p. 108).

I also spent significant time assisting the festival coordinator Peter Croll with the overall organisation of the festival. Indeed, without Peter's extraordinary ability to collaborate with local Indigenous people and his vision for a cultural festival, this event would not have been possible. Peter organises all aspects of the festival in collaboration with Mowanjum people. He also is responsible for the float which is entered in the Boab Festival parade, which has won prizes on many occasions (figure 7). My involvement in the Mowanjum Festival reinforced my understanding of what Indigenous/non-Indigenous collaboration might mean. But, as the following account illustrates, my understanding of the nature of collaboration changed when I first journeyed *up-country*. I include this story in detail because of my concern that collaboration *up-country* should be seen as more than a task/work focussed undertaking. It is a sensitive and many nuanced journey with Aboriginal people. This first journey had rich and significant implications for the way in which I undertook the task of sharing in festival preparation and development.



Figure 7: The Mowanjum float in the 2011 Derby Festival parade. Once again the float won first prize.



## 1.4 Journey to *Worrorra* country: encounter with land

I have experienced many journeys with the Mowanjum people over the past ten years – to Cone Bay, and further north to Freshwater Cove as well as to various *Ngarinyin* sites off the Gibb River Road. It is not possible to share these many journeys in this thesis. However, I tell the story of my first major experience of *Worrorra* lands, realising that this story encompasses so many of my later experiences including visits to major cave sites such as the *Wandjina Namarali*. This story illustrates the importance of land to Aboriginal Elders such as Donny. I experienced what it meant to be a guest in the Other's land and the importance of being in relationship as I learnt what it meant to participate in the community's life.

The journey from Mowanjum to Cone Bay, a day's trip for seventy to eighty kilometres, took as long as the flight from Melbourne to Broome, and was more strenuous. I felt that I crossed a threshold, one of many that I would encounter over the years. Donny and two other family members were coming home. I was being introduced to the importance of land and culture. On the way, Donny pointed out the tree where his sister had been born, a sign of the acute relationship between land, story and life event. We would continually be reminded of this unique aspect of Aboriginal life and culture. Spirituality is intimately and essentially connected to land and the land's accompanying story.

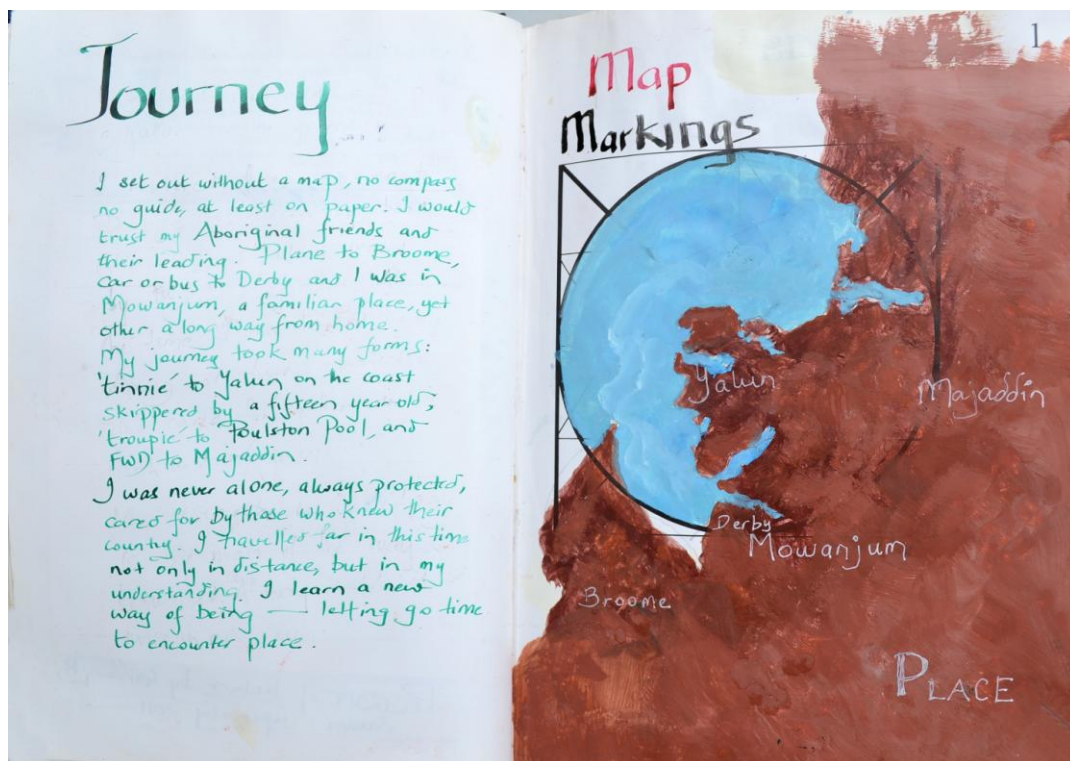


Figure 8: A map of the Western Kimberley with Yalun, Majaddin and Mowanjum named

The journey became more difficult as the day wore on. Our vehicle crawled from rock to rock, finally to reach the point where we could edge our way down to Yalun, Cone Bay. The small settlement included sheds, cottages and a large house. Donny primed the generator, threw the switch and the machine burst to life. The place lit up with light, revealing the extent of the settlement. To my surprise some engineer had put streetlights on the beach.

The next day we took the boat on a long journey down the length of Cone Bay. We went even further the following day. This time we travelled to the reef at the place where the bay meets the ocean. On the way, we stopped at a pristine beach. Donny explained that this is a *Wandjina* place. There was no cave with a *Wandjina* painting. Rather, this is one of the many places where the *Wandjina* created water, trees and rock. He told me of the time when he cleared some of the weeds and undergrowth. A cloud formed and within a short time rain fell. Obviously, the *Wandjina* was not happy!

One of the key ways in which the *Worrorra* men experience and relate to land and sea is in the hunt for turtle. This hunt is seen as integral to being a man in *Worrorra* society. Together with a non-Indigenous friend, we were invited to become hunters and to take risks that we would not normally contemplate in our urban life-space. We hunted the turtle on the reef. I was aware that crossing into hunter territory brought with it the need for awareness and concentration. Donny wanted me to drive the boat as he stood on the bow. I felt the huge responsibility of this task, because Donny's life would be in my hands if we chased a turtle. He took me through the strong currents and set me to this difficult task. Unfortunately (or was it fortunately?) no turtle came our way and I never will know how I might have coped with this responsibility. If Donny had sighted a turtle, I would have had to open the throttle and hope that I had the capability to steer the boat through the shallow reef, avoiding the rocks.

This journey and many to come would challenge my Western sensitivities and understanding. For example, hunting the turtle is exciting but disconcerting for a *kardia* such as me. On the one hand I am keen to engage in an adventure. On the other I am troubled that such a lovely creature should be sacrificed in this way. To add to my dilemma, I found it daunting to be at the helm of the boat should a turtle be sighted. I know that I would have to control the boat well to avoid any mishap including loss of life. This was a "large ask". Donny may have sensed my inner reluctance even though I appeared to be willing. I felt differently later in the trip, having experienced navigating the boat through some difficult waters, but the opportunity never came again. I also found myself entering the experience of a hunter. I was reluctant at first and content

to experience the journey. In time, I would experience the same desire to fish and hunt as my companions.



Figure 9: My impression of the mangroves and resident crocodile at Yalun

I fell asleep on the boat out of sheer exhaustion. My body was in need of healing despite my need to be adventurous and alert. I had an important dream which alerted me to the challenge of moving into Aboriginal time and space.

*The dream begins with me tidying up the accounts. I then cross the road against the traffic. I feel silly that I did this. I then proceed to this ball carrying a shield with a large totem attached. I notice a fellow minister who says something like "come in". I say which side of the door are you. I am now talking to a blackfella. Someone says, we don't know you two apart! I enter the hall and proceed to join in the activities (Personal journal, 2003).*

I woke up during the night next to the fire and began thinking about the account that I would give to my church. The dream still poses an enigma for this current research. How do I give an account of many experiences such as these? My Western philosophy and upbringing seems totally alien to such experience. How can one give an objective account of such a celebration of life? I had thought of this trip as ministerial education but this journey crossed against the traffic, and challenged the usual definitions of ministerial education (and research!). Where might turtle

hunting on the reef fit in with my spirituality? The next part of the dream affirmed that I was travelling in the right direction. I go to a ball, a celebration. The drama with the accounts has ended. I carry a shield that could indicate my new identity. It has a large totem attached. I was invited to relate to the land in a new way. The fellow minister in the dream was someone who, many years ago, spoke of his fear of the bush. He symbolises my shadow figure, the one who would try to stop me from making the crossing into this extraordinary space. He is there and says come in. I say, "Which side of the door are you?" I am reminded of the story that speaks of one's encounter with the soul, the beloved. The beloved asks, "Who are you?" The door is not opened until the person responds, something akin to "I am yourself!" This time I am talking to a "blackfella" and another says, "I do not know you two apart!" Something was happening within me in response to this land and this experience that took me beyond ordinary Black/white distinctions. I was being initiated into another reality. This question continues to be relevant. Which side of the door am I on? At times I have felt the stranger, definitely the onlooker from another culture. At other times, I am part of the Mowanjum people, losing my sense of being Other.

Then following the dream I experienced the "barramundi" incident. My Aboriginal friends decided that it was time for me to catch a barramundi. Was this part of my initiation into the land? Strangely, I felt that it was my turn to make a catch. It was like an inner knowing. I had avoided doing much fishing until now, though I had been keen to learn how to fold and throw the net. James (now deceased) was so determined that I catch my barramundi that he stayed close to help me. We walked around to the mangroves at the other end of the beach. Then with my Aboriginal friend's help we netted some bait. I threw my hand line in near the mangroves as James had suggested and waited for the catch. It came – not once but three times. Each time, I got a barramundi – and lost it. James suggested that I had the wrong hook on the line. So, armed with a stronger hook, I threw the line again with James' guidance. A fish bit. I waited a moment, pulled, and then saw the fish jump from the water. The fish jumped again as I held my breath. Then, to my surprise, I guided the creature to shore. I had caught my first barramundi. James was excited and wanted me to try again, but we had run out of bait. Anyway, one was enough. I think that the men wanted me to prove that I had some hunter in me. I wanted to affirm that I had followed their lead and learnt an important lesson in this week's stay. The fish was like a trophy, honouring my week at Cone Bay. It was also a kind of initiation which opened a door to the future experience and trust.

The *up-country* journey did not end with the Cone Bay trip. My journeys to Mowanjum continued with a kind of rhythm over the ensuing years. I would return each July for the festival. I

would usually be invited to take part in a journey *up-country*, as a kind of acknowledgement of my involvement with the festival, but also of my interest in learning more of the culture of the people. These trips included a number of journeys to *Worrorra* lands, from return visits to Cone Bay to more extensive visits up the coast. I had the opportunity to visit Langgi, further up the coast, on two occasions and there visit *Namarali*'s cave. This cave hosts one of the great spiritual icons in Australia. Donny had repainted *Namarali* in the presence of men, women and children from Mowanjum as his father before him had done (Blundell and Woolagoodja, 2005, p. 229). He then revealed *Namarali* to Australia, for this was the *Wandjina* released during the Opening Ceremony in the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games. On one of the initial visits to Mowanjum, Donny asked me this hard question at: "Why do you want to come on this journey? Why do you and others want to see or film our *Wandjinas* like *Namarali*?" I wrote in my diary: "I want to listen. I want to hear what the people and the land might say to me about faith and about life" (Personal Journal, 2003). We discussed other issues including the necessity for me to learn more of the Law and the culture. I realised that this would take time and sensitive listening. The Law and the culture are complex and I must avoid the tendency, ever-present in white society, to think that we know something when we are still only vague or confused. It is also important to refrain from putting the Law and the story in my own words. The caretaker storytellers must be respected. Sometimes a question like this is worked through as much unconsciously as consciously. Indeed, dreams are key to this thesis because they reveal my inner explorations. I am personally and deeply affected by such journeys as the following dream indicates:

*I dream something about Mowaljarlai. I am squeezing through a narrow passage as I journey through a building. I go into the church room and discover that someone has left the iron on. It has blown out! I try and leave messages for church people, and discover they are on a working bee. They have half built a mandala. Parishioners at Richmond are putting back the rocks (Personal Journal, July 2003).*

I wrote in response:

I sit with Donny and enjoy the hospitality of Mowanjum because I met David Mowaljarli. He remains the key figure in my journey to the Kimberley. However, it is a life-changing journey, like a birth. I squeeze through a narrow passage as in any initiation or new birth situation. I remember that one of the questions that Donny and I explored around the fire was the meaning of new birth. What does it mean to be born again? I believe journeys can bring a person to this point. It is a difficult and painful time when one's resources and strength is tested to the extreme. I was

journeying through this kind of life changing experience, a new birth. In the light of the dream, I saw that I was given the task of trying to mediate between this unique experience and my church community. They are on a working bee and caught up in their concerns. This is an unnerving, if not the prophetic part of the dream. What will I do with the insights and learning to come from this extraordinary journey? (Personal journal, July 2003)

The dream alluded to a *mandala* which parishioners from my church were making at the time. The symbol of the *mandala* speaks of that integration of bringing the opposites together. Ironically, this underlies my thesis. I am relating the two opposite cultures and philosophies. Such a *mandala* would not be completed until it was fully formed and the opposites brought together in a meaningful whole. I am a long way from such an integration. Indeed, as I would discover, the opposites are within me, as I try to integrate different ontological approaches, one based on separation and the other on relating. The dream included the action of people putting back the rocks; reflecting to the work of the parishioners. I was doing likewise. I was laying down something of substance that would affect my future ministry and understanding of spirituality. Ironically, I would explore what it means to step beyond a “working bee” mentality and see the importance of being in relationship.

### **1.5 The Boab Network: the *collaboration* broadens**

In 2009, a group from the Floreat All Saints’ Uniting Church in Perth offered their assistance to the Mowanjum community. I found their presence particularly invigorating because it meant that the collaboration had broadened. I fondly remember the days where a number of Aboriginal and non-Indigenous people, such as myself, worked side by side preparing the festival. However, the presence of the Boab Network allowed me to stand aside so that, in 2011, I took more of a “back seat” and concentrated on my photography. This enabled the Mowanjum people take a greater role in festival organisation, which proved very satisfying for me and the Boab Network.

The Boab Network was established by the Floreat All Saints’ Uniting Church in 2008. The Mowanjum Uniting Church asked the congregation if they could respond to the serious crisis facing the community, namely the high number of youth suicides. This crisis reoccurred in 2012 and Mowanjum received national press coverage, where it was described as part of the “suicide epicentre of Australia”. Journalist Russell Skelton interviewed Mowanjum community Elders in 2012, following an unprecedented rise in youth suicides. There were twenty-one Aboriginal deaths for that year around Derby/Mowanjum. The estimated rate for the Kimberley of one death

in 1,200 is dramatically in excess of the NSW average of Indigenous youth suicides, that is, one in every 100,000 (Skelton, 2012).

In response to the initial 2008 crisis, the Church through the Boab Network established a range of programs including a holiday program for children and youth, a Computer Resource Centre and in 2012 assisted in the development of an Education Hub for teenage mothers.

The Boab Network responded to my request that they be part of this thesis and have contributed substantially to my thought and development along with people from Mowanjum. Not only have they generously participated in continuous and ongoing conversations, but they have taken my findings into account as they formulated their vision, values and strategy for the future (see section 7.7).

## **1.6 The cultural interface and the context of collaboration**

My *up-country* journeys and involvement in the Mowanjum Festival are examples of entering the physical and emotional space between two distinct and often opposing cultures. Torres Strait Islander academic Martin Nakata uses the term “cultural interface” to describe a broad interface which is:

a multi-layered and multi-dimensional space of dynamic relations constituted by the institutions of time, place, distance, different systems of thought, competing and contesting discourses within and between different knowledge traditions, and different systems of social, economic and political organisation (Nakata, 2007, p. 199).

This interface is the intersection of two radically different approaches to life, philosophy, spirituality and relationships. It encompasses multiple histories, reflecting the difference between Black and white perspectives. My research focuses on this intersection.



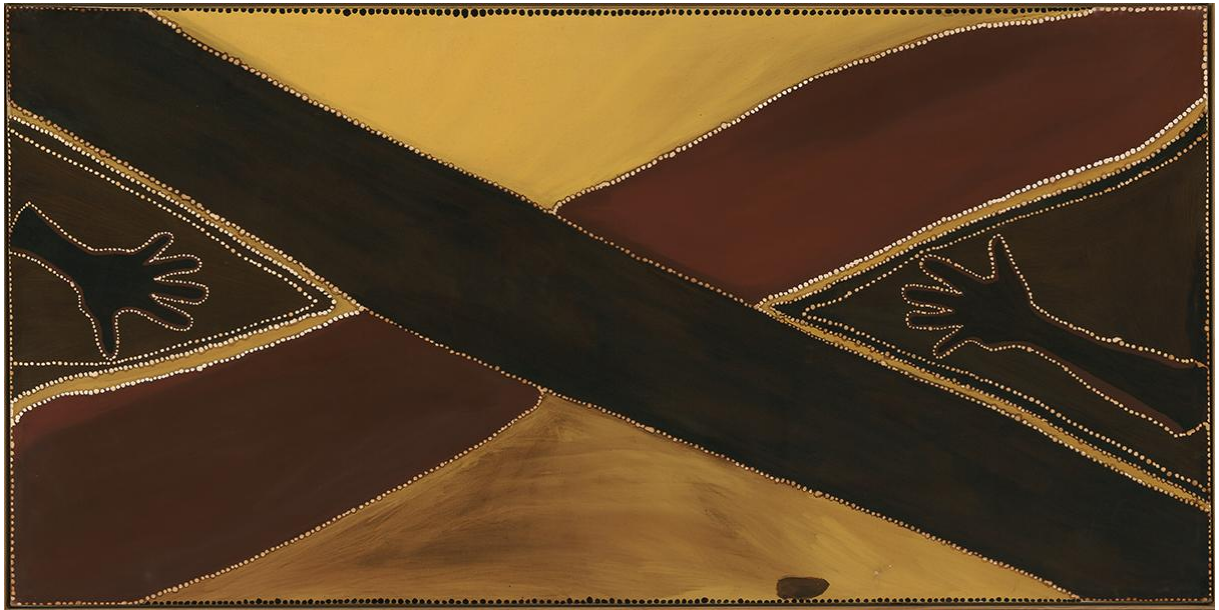


Figure 10: Rover Thomas, *Roads meeting* 1987 (natural pigments on canvas, 90.0 x 180.0 cm, Used by permission: National Gallery of Australia)

One way of imaging the intersection between Indigenous and non-Indigenous world views is the meeting of two roads, one travelled by Indigenous people and communities and one by non-Indigenous. Aboriginal artist Rover Thomas expressed this meeting in his painting *Roads meeting* 1987, used in a Reconciliation calendar in 1999, the year leading to the end of the millennium (figure 10). The painting is two lines crossing, one a red line and the other a black line. It has two stop signs: two triangles with an outstretched hand in each. Wally Caruana (2000) writes that the painting is: “Potentially an image of reconciliation, of the artist’s belief that both Black and white can live in harmony, the image of the black line symbolising a bitumen road crossing the red line of an ancestral path suggests an inescapable reality; the mixture of peoples sharing the same lands in the contemporary world” (para. 23).

The painting provokes the question: “How do Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples relate given fundamental philosophic and cultural differences?” My response to Thomas’ painting is in figure 11 below. This intersection between two contrasting cultures, Aboriginal and white, is a place of contradiction and tension which can be described not only as the cultural interface but also by other names such as borderlands, or entanglement. Feminist writer Gloria Anzaldúa writes of borderlands. She recounts growing up between two cultures, Indigenous Mexican and Anglo. She speaks of the land of her people now separated by the Mexico/USA border. This place is one of contradictions where hatred, anger and exploitation are part of the landscape. She writes:

Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle



and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy...[A borderland] is not a comfortable territory to live in, [a] place of contradictions (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 7).

Educationalist Celia Hague-Brown (1990) writes of border work and the many ways that people might engage in this work across trans-cultural frontiers, some to impose their ideas, some to study, and some by invitation. She struggles with the issue of invitation and argues that there were times when she undertook border work because she had something to contribute. She writes, “Throughout, the work was a joint venture. I never really felt like an author, but fell back on the trite but nevertheless appropriate image of the quilt maker” (p. 235). I too relate to this image of a quilt maker stitching various pieces together. I do not agree that the metaphor is trite. Rather, it is a metaphor for keeping the distinctiveness of each culture separate (the individual panels) while achieving an overall integration. I see such border work in similar terms. I have tried to keep the integrity of the Mowanjum people’s contribution to this work, while adding my own creativity. In other words, I did not provide the material of our engagement, but used my skills to stitch the different pieces together.

Hague-Brown (1990) writes that “The First Nations struggle for land, sovereignty, and self-government is pervasive in the border area” (p. 230). Her words remind me that I and members of the Boab Network have entered this border area where the struggle for land and sovereignty is very real. Such border work involves a contested space which, as social researcher Lorenzo Veracini (2003) argues, leads to a difficult reconciliation given the “indelible stain” of the past. The writing of this history has been marked with conflicted interpretations between those who would ignore or deny this stain and those like Henry Reynolds (2001, 2013) who argue that Australia will only move forward when this terrible past is faced.

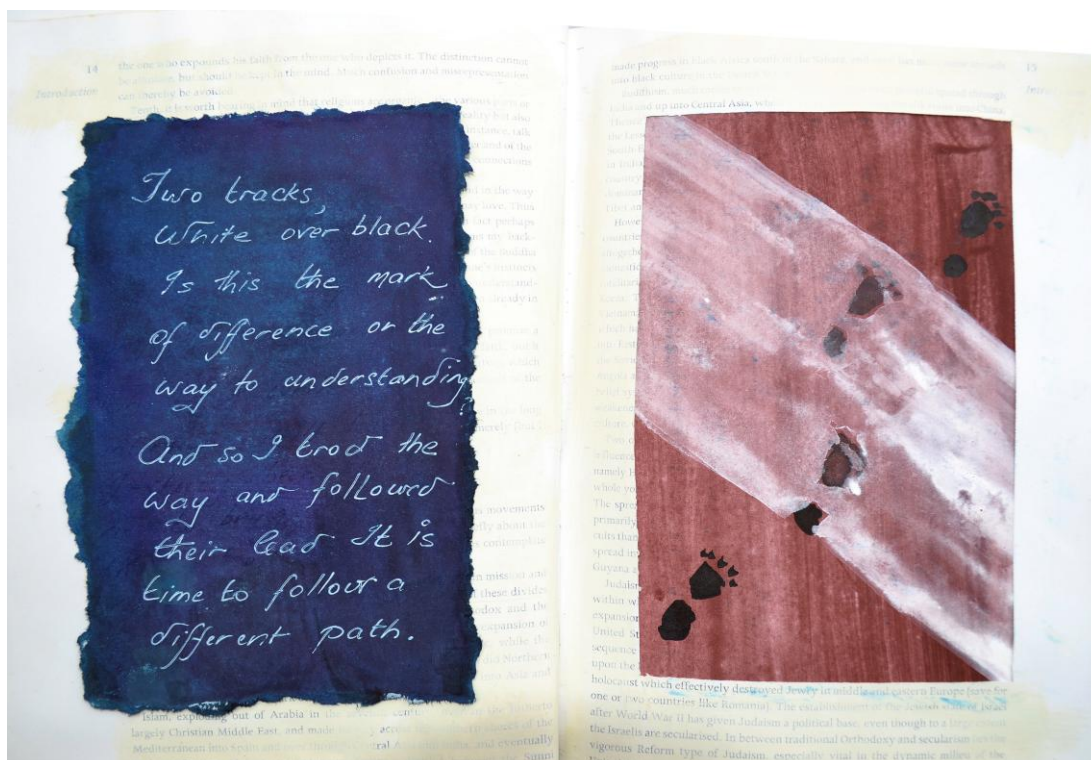


Figure 11: The above image from my Altered Book was influenced by Rover's painting- *Roads meeting* 1987

I entered this contested space both physically and intellectually. Mary Louise Pratt writes of such a contested space, the contact zone as those “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today” (Pratt, 1991, p. 34). Such contests are evident in the present day Kimberley, as traditional owners face the ongoing march of colonial development. Sandy Toussaint, Patrick Sullivan and Sarah Yu, for example, write of water ways in the Kimberley and stress the interconnections between mythical, historical and everyday events. *Ngarinyin* Elder David Mowaljarlai (as cited in Toussaint, Sullivan & Yu, 2010) argues that the “free flow of the river should not be interfered with or blocked (for example, by constructing irrigation canals or by damming it) so that the increase in all human, flora and fauna species will be maintained” (p. 66). Traditional owners such as the *Ngarinyin* and *Worrorra* peoples, in gaining native title recognition, are conscious of the need to protect the land and ensure that their rights are not further evaporated through encroaching development. They are rightly suspicious of non-Indigenous presence and interest in their land and their culture.

Margaret Sommerville and Tony Perkins (2003) have used the concept of border work together with contact zone to research intercultural collaboration between an Aboriginal corporation and a university. They explain that the concept of “contact zone” as a shifting border

which is a public arena of written text, oral stories and the research project involving an institution (p. 255). They explore what it means to work in that critical if not political space that exists between an Aboriginal approach to knowing and knowledge and sharing to a wider non-Indigenous audience.

While I find their approach helpful in identifying a process of engagement, I want to use a less contentious vocabulary. I therefore write about a process of *relating*. The process and practice of collaboration occurs within this contact zone or trans-cultural meeting place. Such tensions and power issues inevitably affect the collaboration, thus suggesting that one should look beyond the product to the *process* and the dynamics affecting the process. Because of the problematic history of “collaboration”, I have remained uneasy about the use of the word. It can be too restrictive, focussing on *working* together rather than *being* together. There needs to be regard for larger cultural and philosophical considerations that are clearly evident in the engagement of land and culture. Border work, as Haig-Brown (1990) explains, always involves a tension between the different understandings of reality between the First Nations people and public perception. In this respect I agree with her that my goal needs to “be able to hear clearly and portray clearly what aboriginal [sic] people are saying” (p. 239). This is a central aim of my thesis.

Such border work is related to the business of Reconciliation which provoked my own involvement in the Kimberley. I joined with hundreds of thousands of people who walked over key Australian bridges in 2000 to call for an end to Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage, and to support the formal Reconciliation process. However, as Andrew Gunstone (2007) reminds us, Reconciliation lingers as unfinished business with political goals such as sovereignty, self-determination, treaty and land rights yet to be adequately addressed. My journeys in the Kimberley enabled me to understand this failure from the perspective of the Mowanjumb people who continue to struggle to maintain their connection with their lands. Difficulties include having to operate within a legal English language and meaning where the concept of “rights” and “title” are white inventions, not to mention the administrative burden in order to justify continued “right” to the land. Thus my thesis, although focussing on trans-cultural relating, has political implications given the perpetual questions about how we relate as a nation.

## **1.7 The meaning of collaboration**

My engagement with Mowanjumb people, both individually and within the Boab Network, made me acutely aware of the issue of collaboration. I say “issue” because at times we were definitely collaborating with the people, but at other times we related in other ways. “Collaboration” is a word used to describe working together to achieve a goal (Crosby, 2010).

Other words which could be used include cooperation, partnership, alliance and relationship. To work in collaboration is to work with shared goals, and possibly sharing knowledge and expertise. The word is contentious, having acquired a negative meaning in the Second World War when it was used to refer to those individuals and groups who had cooperated with the enemy occupiers in their own countries. Aboriginal people of the Kimberley were coerced to collaborate when the colonialists took control during the late nineteenth century. If they did not collaborate and move to missions or pastoral stations, they risked being shot or imprisoned.

I asked *Worrorra* Elder Janet Oobagooma what word she might use to describe collaboration. Janet replied with two words, *Jarug* meaning to gather or gather up and *Nambarr* meaning mixing together. She said that that these words can be used in *Worrorra* and *Ngarinyin*. I then asked, “When would you use it?” Janet replied:

<i>Worrorra: jarug ngarrbeye</i>	Let’s get together.
<i>Ngarinyin: jarug ngadmern</i>	Let’s get together.
<i>Ngarinyin: nambarr ngadmern</i>	We gather ourselves.
(possibly <i>Worrorra</i> ) <i>nambarrij</i>	All together

(Recorded conversation, July 2013, as transcribed by linguist Thomas Saunders<sup>1</sup>).

Janet’s response indicates an issue explored in this thesis: namely, the need for a much broader and richer understanding of collaboration than simply working together to achieve a particular outcome. It is a trans-cultural gathering or partnership offering new opportunities to learn and exchange gifts, as would happen when Janet’s people got together with other clans and language groups. Studies or historical accounts that reflect collaboration or trans-cultural partnerships can be expressed in many different ways from one partner or group taking the major responsibility for the direction and shape of the collaboration, to a joint exercise in which both partners or groups bring their respective expertise or world views into the collaboration.

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<sup>1</sup> *Worrorra* written in current *Worrorra* orthography (spelling system) as used by *Worrorra arriarrganang* (*Worrorra Language Project*). In this orthography *e* is pronounced as in English “bear”, “pear”

*Ngarinyin* written in Practical Orthography, a spelling system that can be used for writing many Aboriginal languages. In this orthography *e* is pronounced as in English “me”.

Collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people and/or communities is not a recent phenomenon. Anthropologist Peter Sutton (2009) writes of “unusual couples” who committed themselves in a “demanding way to the creation of knowledge and understanding across what has often been a vast cultural divide” (p. 189). He writes of an “adoptive kinship” which is established between two people. Sutton pays tribute to such couples who have related over a long period of time. For example, anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner acknowledged his relationship with Nym Pandak from Port Keats (now Wadeye, Northern Territory) who was a close friend for over forty years. However, Stanner’s work was particularly influenced by Durmugam (“Smiler”) from Daly River Crossing. Sutton tells the story of their meeting and work together intensively in 1935 and then later in the 1950s. He comments that Durmugam “chose Stanner as his anthropologist more than Stanner chose him as main informant” (p. 183). This relationship and others such as Raiwalla and Donald Thomson and Lazarus Lamilami and Ronald Berndt (both from Arnhem Land) are ones of intellectual partnership “rather than simply that of teacher learner, or informant-scientist” (p. 186).

Although many such relationships are partnerships, Van Toorn (2006) writes of others like Bennelong’s collaboration with Governor Arthur Phillip at the time of the First Fleet illustrate clearly uneven power relationships (pp. 53-70). Their complex relationship reflected the tension and ambiguity which existed between a colonialist leader and an Indigenous informant. Thus collaborative relationships range from those based on equality of relating to those reflecting the racism of the time. The quality and nature of the relating is therefore of more importance than simply whether or not the parties collaborate.

## **1.8 Anthropological and other professional collaborations**

Early researchers were clearly interested in collecting stories and documenting culture for their benefactors, primarily the universities of Europe. Andreas Lommel (1997), for example, spent several months in 1938 with three Aboriginal groups: *Wunambal*, *Worrorra*, *Ngarinyin*. Lommel’s exhibition and publication, which included a visual record of the daily life of the people he regarded as a hunter gatherer people, undisturbed in their “Stone Age state” (p. 1), was translated into English in the late 1990s. Lommel was a member of the Frobenius Institute in Frankfurt, specialising not only in African culture, but in rock paintings from all over the world. He collected stories and cultural information working in collaboration with an Aboriginal healer and senior Elder. However, his data must be questioned considering the short time spent with the people. Indeed, this form of collective anthropology was used as a tool to support Western philosophical assumptions regarding race and “civilisation”. A more extreme collector was

zoologist Eric Mjöberg (1882-1938), who arranged an expedition with the intention of bringing back as many skeletons as possible of “the interesting Australian negro race, which is increasingly dying out” (Lindqvist, 2012, p. 90, Mjöberg, Luotsinen, Akerman, Bridge, & Epton, 2012). This was the very antithesis of collaboration, let alone co-knowing and co-being.

In contrast, Rev J. R. B. Love brought a respectful understanding of the people and their culture. Love experienced the *Worrorra* culture from his initial placement at Port George IV Mission (near Kunmunya; see Figure 3) in 1914, learning their language and teaching the people to speak and write high English and not “pidjin” English (Love, 2000). The latter was a simplified form of English commonly spoken and taught to Aboriginal people by non-Indigenous people. He spoke of being “at home” when he first arrived at Port George IV (McKenzie, 1969, p. 38). His ethnographical works such as *Rock paintings of the Worrorra and their mythological interpretation* and *Worora kinship gestures* provide useful background to my research in the Kimberley (Love, 1930, 1941). *Stone Age Bushmen of today* is a comprehensive account of Love’s experience of life with the *Worrorra* (Love, 1936). It is written for the general public, describing *Worrorra* life in detail from birth to the grave. One of Love’s remarkable achievements was to care for and nurture the mission at Kunmunya in the face of limited funding from government and church. McKenzie (1969) quotes Love’s response to criticism in a church paper of the high cost of missions to the Aboriginal people. He replied, “I am proud to be your representative in helping to pay some of our national debt to the Aborigines” (p. 98). Although, Love’s writings sometimes reflect the parochial bias of missionaries of the time, I see him as offering a significant model for trans-cultural relating in his attitudes to the integrity of the *Worrorra* culture and his seeking to go out of his way to relate to the people in their lands. For example Andrew Watts, currently undertaking research into the life and ministry of Love, wrote: “Before Bob Love left to go to World War I in mid 1915, he reported to the church on his explorations and recommendations on a site. In his conclusion he made the comment, ‘Having established contact with this tribe, it is unthinkable that the Mission should remove beyond the Worrorra country’” (Personal communication, May 2013). These words affirm that Bob Love understood the importance of traditional lands for the people, which continue to influence their actions today.

Anthropologist F. D. McCarthy notes that research scholars have been visiting the Kimberley since 1927. He writes, “Their major anthropological research has centred on social structure and kinship, art and mythology, human biology and languages” (cited in Craig, 1968, p. v). The most prominent amongst the long list of early anthropologists was A.P. Elkin, who visited the Kimberley, including the Kunmunya Mission, in the late 1920s. The impact of his visit was recorded in the *Worrorra* people naming an Aboriginal child Elkin in his honour (McKenzie,

1969, p. 91). However, Elkin and others were at the mercy of notorious Western Australia Chief Protector of Aborigines A.O. Neville, who controlled their movements and what they might report (WA, Chief Protector of Aborigines, 1929). For example, The Chief Protector's report includes details of Elkin journeying with A.O. Neville, who obviously took a close interest in the results of the expedition.

Hilton Deakin (1978), a Catholic Bishop, explored trans-cultural issues between the church and the Indigenous community at Kalumburu on the Kimberley Coast. He explored the experiences of missionaries and Indigenous people under the heading of *The Unan (Wurnan)*, the reciprocal sharing that features in Indigenous culture. He presented a detailed examination of both groups from a detached position, studying the people and their beliefs. For example, he presents extensive "knowledge" of the *unan* tracks and beliefs which is a very useful guide for those such as me who do not come with anthropological knowledge.

In contrast to the many early anthropologists who collected knowledge for academic institutions, working from a stance of "scientific" objectivity, many contemporary anthropologists work in collaboration for the benefit of the people. I acknowledge the work of Anthony Redman and Valda Blundell, who have worked closely with Mowanjum people and their relations *up-country* to record information which has been extremely relevant to the quest for native title recognition. Redmond (2001), for example undertook his doctoral thesis with the *Ngarinyin* people. He, then, continued to work with them as they struggled for land rights and Native Title (Redmond, 2007, 2007a). In recent years, Sue O'Connor and Anthony Barham worked with Donny Woolagoodja to photograph *Worrorra* cave paintings as a record for preservation (O'Connor, Barham & Woolagoodja, 2008). Hannah Rachel Bell (1998; 2009) worked with David Mowaljarlai over many years. As a non-Indigenous writer, she tried to engage that cultural interface, weaving the teaching that she received from Mowaljarlai with Western thought forms. However, while I acknowledge the collaborative relationships of these people, I have not tried to emulate them, as I have no wish to be an anthropologist. My focus is not the gathering of knowledge so much as the process of knowing. It is important to enable the people of Mowanjum to speak for themselves and not to act merely as their interpreter. As the following examples demonstrate, they have found a voice, in collaboration with appropriate *kardia* (white) assistance.

## **1.9 The Mowanjum people collaborating to share their history and culture**

In recent years, Aboriginal people and communities such as Mowanjum have taken a more active role in the sharing of their stories. Mowanjum people's voice and point of view is clearly present. David Mowaljarlai was particularly active in promoting his *Ngarinyin* culture and sharing

it with wider Australia. For example, *Visions of Mowanjum*, presents a collation of “Aboriginal Writings from the Kimberley” (Mowaljarlai, 1980). Mowaljarlai exemplified the Aboriginal Elder dealing with the complexities of the cultural interface. Mowaljarlai sought through his writing and other interactions to open his world to non-Indigenous people and attracted me to journey with his people to explore creative possibilities for collaboration. Mowaljarlai collaborated with photographer Jutta Malnic, taking her on a journey through his country. Malnic joined with anthropologist Elaine Godden to produce a book on the *Rock Paintings of Aboriginal Australia* (Godden & Malnic, 1982). Malnic shares insights which have been given to her by Mowaljarlai or other Elders whom she met on her travels. Together they later produced a book designed to transmit aspects of the *Ngarinyin* story, inextricably linked to the land of which it is part. Malnic’s awe-inspiring photography added to Mowaljarlai’s story and allowed the reader to appreciate a little of the mystery of this country (Mowaljarlai & Malnic, 1993). In *Gwion Gwion*, Mowaljarlai also took part in an extraordinary dialogue with three other *Ngarinyin* Elders, as they sought to explain their culture and with it the meaning of the Gwion Gwion figures (Doring, 2000). Another excellent example is the work of the Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Culture Centre in producing *New Legend* (La Fontaine & Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Culture Centre, 2006). The book, which is filled with photos and Aboriginal voices, affirms that Law and culture remain strong in the Kimberley.

The Mowanjum Aboriginal community decided to write their own history and with Jebb’s editorial assistance shared their stories including their *Wandjina* traditions, in a recent book to celebrate fifty years of community history (Jebb, 2008). This book is an excellent example of a collaborative approach to history and certainly complements and repositions McKenzie’s earlier history. For example, the historical account begins with stories of the *Wandjinis* who created the land and the culture (c.f. the beginning of the mission). Another recent example is that of Donny Woolagoodja, who with the assistance of anthropologist Valda Blundell, wrote Donny’s father’s life story and about Donny’s own involvement in repainting significant *Wandjina* figures on the Kimberley coast. This book is an example of both listening and collaboration (Blundell & Woolagoodja, 2005). As Blundell notes, the book combines the results of her work with Donny’s father Sam and others, enhanced by Donny’s recollections and knowledge, a listening spanning four decades (p. 19). She writes with her informants, enabling their words to be heard. The people share significant knowledge, with Blundell adding a commentary; therefore the book has been owned by Donny as well as Valda. It is also a book written and dedicated to future *Worrorra* generations as a way of passing on the culture.



## 1.10 Art and culture based Collaborations

Non-Indigenous individuals such as art teacher Mark Norval and Mowanjum Festival coordinator Peter Croll have undertaken significant collaborations with the Mowanjum people. Norval was employed as a TAFE art teacher from 1998, with Croll joining with him to work on developing the annual Mowanjum Festival. Norvall recalls his initial meetings with Mowanjum Elders such as David Mowaljarlai in 1982-3 (Norval & Schiel, 2008, p. 106). They were concerned about young people losing their culture. He recalls Mowaljarlai's words, that they should construct something resembling a cave and do paintings all over the rocks. The community hall filled with *Wandjinas* and other totems achieved this vision.

The National Museum of Australia's recent exhibition on the Canning Stock Route also involved Indigenous/non-Indigenous artistic collaboration. This exhibition brought together stories and art work from Indigenous peoples affected by the take-over of wells/springs between Halls Creek and Wiluna (WA) by drovers, police and prospectors in the early twentieth century. The *up-country* collaboration illustrates what can be achieved when non-Indigenous artists and curators supported a number of Aboriginal artists as they encountered the Canning Stock Route and reclaimed their connection with the various wells and the surrounding land. The journey resulted in an extraordinary exhibition in the National Museum of Australia in Canberra and a book about the journey and the exhibition (National Museum of Australia, 2010). The exhibition provided a multi-modal illustration of the inherent tension at that borderland between Aboriginal culture and colonial intrusion, through the use of visual art, video, exhibits and narrative.

Trans-cultural collaborations between Kimberley Aboriginal people and non-Indigenous missionaries, settlers and later other peoples were mixed. Aboriginal people received skills necessary to relate to mainstream Australian culture. But this came at cost, namely their loss of land and substantial threats to health and well-being. Aboriginal people facing enormous difficulties in order to maintain their connection with traditional lands and culture. In spite of these challenges, the people have maintained their connection by their own resilience together with the assistance and collaboration of non-Indigenous people who have given support. For example Sally Treloyn has been collaborating with *Ngarinyin* singer Matt Martin and his father Scotty for many years to ensure that Kimberley songs and dances are recorded and passed on to future generations. As Matt Martin explained in a recent lecture in Melbourne:

We go to celebrate and meet again with other tribes in the Kimberley and all that idea is to bring back the country and the spirit of the country. The spirit of the country will always be there and through the dancing we trying to keep the spirit there longer,

keep teaching them.... That's why we keep teaching our children the main thing is to keep on culture, the cultural side and the main thing is to keep it strong (Martin & Treloyn, 2012).

Matt's words reflect the long term desire for the people to retain their culture and their deep connection with traditional lands. We, in the Boab Network, have been supporting this desire, and have assisted as Mowanjum people return to their lands as well as in the annual Mowanjum Festival.

### **1.11 Up-country collaborations**

Palmer et al. (2006) in their paper "Going back to country with bosses" give an account of a journey as a means for intergenerational contact involving Indigenous lore and custom. Kingsley et al. (2008) write of other collaborations and partnerships between Victorian Aboriginal people and governmental bodies concerning care for country. Indigenous government employees were consulted to identify key themes relating to Indigenous involvement in country. These included overcoming barriers to access country, education regarding native title for Indigenous communities, building governmental capacity to cater for Indigenous needs and expanding Indigenous communities' abilities to care for land and to be consulted about their traditional lands. A key point in this consultation was the need to build a stronger relationship among stakeholders, Aboriginal people and communities. These themes might also apply in the Kimberley. In researching collaborative journeys to traditional lands, my focus was on the *relationships* that exist between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous people involved, particularly as they encounter the land. I was therefore interested in the *process* of the collaboration as well as its *product*. Given the benefits incurred by return to country, my thesis allows the people to recount their stories in their way, referring to their unique relationship with the land.

My major host in the period of this thesis inquiry (2010-13) has been Eddie Bear, who is one of the traditional owners of Majaddin. This is *Ngarinyin* land, situated between Mount Elizabeth Station and Munja. Eddie is an Elder in his sixties and is currently chairman of the Mowanjum Community Council and a pastor of the Assemblies of God Church in Derby. Eddie's invitation to me extended both to undertake research into the collaborative relationship between Mowanjum and the Boab Network, and additionally to work on writing a family story. I was not aware of the importance of Majaddin for Eddie and his family before the trips outlined in chapters 3-6. I knew that he had an interest in this land, but I had no idea of its history or the profound nature of this relationship. He had invited us (the Boab Network) into a collaboration which was instrumental to realising his vision for the future.

### **1.12 Collaboration within the trans-cultural space or borderlands,**

In this chapter I have presented a range of collaborations within and beyond the Kimberley, including my own experience of collaboration. Such collaborative relating often takes place in a contested or tenuous space reflecting a history of white control and oppression. These examples of trans-cultural relating include the complex relating on the Presbyterian Mission, at times paternalistic, at other times more insightful when the needs and culture of the people were respected. Such collaboration reflected the need to survive in the face of white oppression but it also offered Aboriginal people the opportunity to learn white culture so necessary for living with it.

Mowanjum people and their forebears collaborated with anthropologists. At times they were properly consulted, but many times their responses were hidden under the guise of informant, or used without their informed consent. Those who studied Aboriginal people brought a European methodology and mindset, even though they collected the information and represented it within an academic context. It was like mining but for knowledge rather than minerals. There are of course more enlightened examples of collaboration in the work of those like Blundell, Malnic and Doring who ensured the prominence of Indigenous voice over their own. Jebb is another example of this sensitivity because she supported the people of Mowanjum as they shared their history. I also shared practical examples of collaborative relating, noting my own role and its impact on my research/inquiry.

In my own journey, at times I have slipped into colonialist thinking and taken initiative or responsibility without adequately considering the needs and wishes and ways of being/relating of my Indigenous partners. However, I have also learnt the value of opening myself to their hospitality and guidance, particularly in *up-country* situations. At festival time, I have been festival-focussed and perhaps this has been required given the need to produce a product. However, I have also been uneasy about being caught up in a non-Indigenous approach to collaboration which ignores an Aboriginal approach to doing and relating.

Thus, I entered this trans-cultural space, with a sense of the tenuous nature of collaboration. On the one hand collaboration has led to creative outcomes. On the other, it has been enforced by circumstances or white control. With this in mind, I decided that I would not seek knowledge that an anthropologist might seek – cultural facts and/or stories. I would not bring knowledge, a particular methodology to the people in order to make change. Rather, I would come as an apprentice open to the leading and teaching of my hosts. I intended to enter this more

positive space as we reflect together on the nature of our relating. My reflection has been guided by three questions concerning collaboration:

**What is the process of collaboration?** This question alerts me to issues such as the power relationships among the collaborative parties. Such power issues and differentials are to be noted in the process of collaboration, those day to day encounters between individuals or groups. To focus on this question is also to acknowledge the fundamental importance of relationship. Understanding and documenting the nature of relationship is key to understanding what trans-cultural collaboration means in an *up-country* setting. This is a question of process rather than product.

**How do I describe this collaborative relationship?** The word “collaboration” assumes the primary importance of doing, taking action. Yet in light of my experience with the Mowanjum people, I have sought to enlarge the meaning of the word collaboration to include being together on the land and learning from each other. Aboriginal scholar Karen Martin (2003) argues that there are three main constructs of her culture’s (Quandamooka) ontology: “ways of knowing” which include the waterways, animals, plants, climate skies and spirits; “ways of being” which refer to establishing a relation with the entities; and “ways of doing” as seen in the way of life, arts, songs, rituals and ceremonies performed in Indigenous communities. As Martin argues, ways of doing are complemented by ways of being and knowing. I would therefore see collaboration in this three way relationship among co-learning (as in sharing the knowing), co-being and co-labouring. These trips provide opportunities for participants to learn from one another, particularly when it includes numbers of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples journeying together. The trips also include opportunities for being in the spirit of *dadirri*, as being in relationship with the land which is described by Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann in Derrington (2000). Shared work such as the Mowanjum Festival, whilst important, must be undergirded by this other way of being. Relating and relationship needs to be the primary focus in any collaboration.

**What is the product of this collaboration?** I assume such action follows from the relating and is of benefit to the people of Mowanjum. There have been many collaborative projects with little or no beneficial outcome for Aboriginal communities, or worse, which have facilitated the destruction of their links with land and/or culture.

I thus entered that critical space between two cultures as a guest and sojourner. I opened myself to the unexpected and unplanned nature of the journey. I reflectively experienced the integrative and anticipatory moment which, as I would discover, prefigures a new tomorrow from a transformed present.

## Chapter 2:

### Cooking up a research project



Figure 12: Black cocky rises white cocky descends

## 2.1 Setting the scene

Research with individuals and families from an Aboriginal community such as Mowanjum is a challenging endeavour in the light of past practices which have ignored or underplayed Aboriginal protocols and needs. In light of such concerns, the above artwork sums up my approach to research (figure 12). The black cocky is emerging while the white cocky is descending. The black cocky rising illustrates my intent to give prominence to Aboriginal research protocols. Therefore, I shaped my research process by reference to an Aboriginal metaphor of hunting and cooking which will be discussed in detail below and throughout the thesis. In this respect, my methodology emerged from an Indigenous framework and from reflections on the journeys I took with Mowanjum people. I was a participant in the process, concurrently dealing with the practical actions of collaboratively being on country, not to mention the implications for the future work of the Boab Network. The white cocky descending indicates the introspective process incorporated in my research. I recorded these journeys through conversations, personal journals and in visual art imagery. In this sense, I was a bricoleur and, like a maker of a quilt, I gathered my material from many sources (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 4).

The notion of an *emerging* methodology stands in direct opposition to research in which the methodology is clearly determined *in advance*. I followed the lead of Indigenous researchers such as Veronica Arbon (2008), whose dissertation grew from her people's worldview, and Margaret Kovach (2009), who asks: "Why are Indigenous methodologies missing from the buffet table of qualitative methodologies available to researchers?" (p. 25). My research arose from the invitations and opportunities that members of the Mowanjum community offered to me and aimed to involve Aboriginal and non-Indigenous participants who undertook *up-country* visits together.

The story of my research and its methodology is developed as follows. In section 2.2 I give particular attention to Indigenous research methodologies, noting critiques of Western research from a range of Indigenous scholars from Australia and overseas. Reviewing Indigenous research methodologies led me to frame a range of principles to undergird my approach to research with Mowanjum individuals and families. These principles which form the ground of my research methodology are summarised in section 2.5. My methodology, though, is an emergent process. In other words, I argue for the reversing of non-Indigenous research practices which apply a predetermined map or methodology to a research journey. This chapter explains the *process* that emerged rather than a Western-style methodology that I intentionally implemented from the beginning. I did not set out with a map, but like the explorer of the past, I constructed the map from what I experienced. In sections 2.3 and 2.4, I describe this process and this map with

the help of a metaphor arising from a hunter-gatherer tradition to represent my approach to research methodology. This metaphor encompasses stages in food gathering and preparation: moving from camp to camp, preparing the fire, hunting and gathering, cooking and sharing, and then the annual pre-season burn.

I use the metaphor of Indigenous food preparation and sharing in response to Indigenous critiques of Western research methodology. For example Margaret Kovach (2009) states that there are two political challenges when adopting an appropriate methodology. It is necessary to adopt a research approach which is accountable to Indigenous community standards, and such an approach must recognise the “fundamental epistemological difference between Western and Indigenous thought” (p. 29). My food gathering metaphor and six stage process brings the many aspects of my research together, as I responded to invitations to collaborate *up-country*, to dialogue with members of an Aboriginal community and to relate my experience to an academic audience. Such research involves being aware of a radical challenge to Western based ontology and epistemology and its derivative “methodologies”. My research describes and conceptualises this challenge and the way Aboriginal thought and practice might lead non-Indigenous researchers to other possibilities for research.

## **2.2: Indigenous critiques of Western Research methodology**

To develop a new research methodology that would adhere to Indigenous protocols necessitates an understanding of both Indigenous research methodologies, as well as Indigenous critiques of Western research methodologies. Maori academic Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) states that “research is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary... [because it] is inextricably linked with European imperialism and colonialism” (p. 1). I agree with Tuhiwai Smith and have tended to avoid the word research or labelling myself as a researcher within the Mowanjum community. On reflection, I think of myself as an apprentice learning from the Elders. To research with Aboriginal people, particularly when involving their traditional lands, is to enter a sensitive domain. Indigenous Scandinavian scholar Jelena Porsanger (2011) states that “Western academic research ... has usually been aimed at solving ‘Indigenous problems’ or searching for answers to a series of questions about Indigenous peoples” with the effect of disempowering Indigenous peoples (p. 108). She summarises the range of relevant issues to decolonise methodologies. Central to Porsanger’s framework are issues such as culturally safe research and protection from misinterpretation, the fragmentation of Indigenous knowledge, intellectual property and the mutual benefit between the researcher and Indigenous community studied.



Figure 13: Trans-cultural camp

The style and spirit of research practice requires review in order to retain integrity within an Indigenous context. Beth Blue Swadener and Kagendo Mutua (2008) argue for “valuing, reclaiming, and foregrounding indigenous voices and epistemologies” (p. 31). Such a process “goes beyond a postcolonial analysis to a more socially engaged, collaborative alliance model that reconstructs the very purposes of research and epistemologies that inform it” (p. 41). I have approached my research with this intention, privileging Indigenous thought and the primacy of relating. Canadian Indigenous academic Shawn Wilson (2003) refers to a growing number of Indigenous researchers

who argue for an Indigenous research paradigm based on the concept of rationality. He argues that what is of fundamental importance is *my* relationship with those with whom *I* am relating. This means that the validity of my research is answerable to the question of how I am carrying out my role in this relationship, including the effect of my research on all concerned.

Aboriginal scholar Lester-Irabinna Rigney (1999) argues for the privileging of Indigenous voices in Indigenous research. Rigney affirms that “Indigenous perspectives must infiltrate the structures and methods of the entire research academy” (p. 114). My response is to base my research on principles arising from Indigenous writers and writings. Such writers also advocate diverse ways of conducting research. For example, a cohort of postgraduate Indigenous scholars from RMIT developed the Deep Listening Project. Non-Indigenous consultant to the project, Laura Brearley (2010), speaks of the “multiple ways of knowing to gather, analyse and represent data” (p. 15). They therefore present their work with diverse media, including story, song, visual arts, movement and dance. I follow a similar approach by incorporating text and visual imagery in my research.

I also approach my research methodology based on several Indigenous researchers’ work with the guidance of an appropriate metaphor. Karen Martin (2008) draws on the *Quampie* story and relatedness theory to present a framework for her research. This story is from her *Quandamoopah* cultural tradition – a story of a saltwater pearl shell or mud oyster. She uses this



story of the pearl created from an irritant and living in the meeting of fresh and saltwater systems to allude to the interface between non-Indigenous and Aboriginal research (p. 91). The story leads to an immersion process in four stages. Similarly, Arbon (2008) turns to the metaphor of the Yalka, a small onion that grows in her country (p. 23). For the Arabana people, the wild onion represents what it is to be, to know and to do. I would not want to appropriate a traditional story and present it as a research metaphor. Rather, I have taken an Indigenous metaphor of food gathering and preparation to honour my involvement with the Mowanjum people.

Martin (2008) presents a four stage research process beginning with the statement that “the Indigenous researcher begins in relatedness to the Ancestral core” (p. 93). It is not possible for me to join her in this awareness, but I begin my research methodology acknowledging the importance of my research as a journey through many camps, just as traditional Kimberley people used to do. Yet as Martin affirms “research is rigorous, relevant and has integrity” (p. 95). This inevitably involves a tension between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal ways, particularly as the researcher brings highly developed non-Indigenous research procedures, including methods of data collection. However, I note that Martin responded to this challenge in research with the *Burungu and Kulu-Yalanji* peoples of far North Queensland by continually referring to their Aboriginal cultural roots to describe and present her research. She also applies non-Indigenous research methodology such as reference to prior studies, pre-study visits, access to personal documents and photographs to complement her journal/field notes, tapes and transcripts. In other words, she had a wide variety of data to give validity to her study.

I am conscious that my research may not adhere to the supposed objectivity of many standard Western research practices. I have relied on a series of often spontaneous conversations supported by my personal observations. Some Indigenous researchers use the term “yarning” and such a practice is incorporated in a variety of research projects (see section 2.6). I place relating at the centre of my study and, as Arbon states, I am embodied, located in the complex interaction of relating to Mowanjum people, the Boab Network and my life in Melbourne (see Arbon, 2008, p. 24).

My work is concerned with a three part triangulation of meaning in two respects. I resonate with Hawaiian academic Manulani Aluli Meyer (2008), who writes of a triangulation of meaning which encompasses body, mind and spirit. In her terms, to be embodied is to be concerned with sensation, decolonisation, emotions, instincts and the complex array of relating to the world in one’s physical body. This physical relating is complemented by mind, which is subjective, logical, knowing and concerned with meaning and epistemology. Meyer adds a third

dimension to meaning: that intangible spirit which is encased in metaphor, transpersonal, the being dimension and this leading to ways of doing.

Thus even though the *up-country* journeys I undertook and the findings associated with them concern significant social and communal issues, my research is of a highly personal nature. The research arose from the unease that I experienced while relating to Aboriginal people for a decade. It is difficult to describe this unease which provoked my research. As I journeyed with Aboriginal people, I realised that I was not simply writing and researching my experience in a cross-cultural situation. This research pointed to a deeper question that has plagued me for over thirty years: how do I integrate different sides of my own self and being? In other words, I have lived life in my actuarial or financial consciousness, able to disconnect myself from the body and land and to think in terms of models. In contrast, I have an intuitive feeling side that resonates with the people of the Kimberley and is at home in the land. I also have a spiritual third expressed in my calling as a Minister of the Uniting Church. This research then became highly personal and had the capacity to transform my life in this world.

This triangulation of meaning can also be expressed as the interaction between the unique world view of Mowanjum people, my own journey of reflection and the later need to communicate both in a Western academic context. Alison Jones and Kuni-Jenkins (2008) write of cross-cultural engagement and warn against the tendency to “dissolve/soften/erase the indigene-colonizer hyphen into a sharing collaborative engagement between ‘us’” (p. 475). It is important to retain the integrity of those with whom I have conversed by not seeking to analyse or fit them into a Western framework. I discovered that the idea of collaboration has serious deficiencies in the light of cultural diversity. Yet, there is a third possibility to be considered, namely my relationship with a Western academic framework. I have therefore not sought to place a Western methodological overlay at this stage, but instead leave that discussion until later (see chapters 6 and 7).

Thus I have not been concerned with issues of validity and the replicability of my results. I have seen my research as exploratory, a study that aims to raise issues for further investigation. This research is both relevant and has integrity. I have adopted the principle of standing with people from Mowanjum as they struggle for their land rights and renewed relationship with land. To take my standpoint with Indigenous people is to adopt an epistemology and ontology which is in tension with those dominant in present Western society. I, the researcher, am not separate from the context of my research. I am invited into a larger and more mediated connection with land, culture and spirituality. Such research challenges Western research, which may be based on the

separation between the sacred and secular or any other kind of separation. It is therefore not neutral but caught up in the continuing struggle of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples to gain rights and access to their lands and voice their concerns within a wider Australia, while dealing with all their other personal struggles resulting from the denial of these rights.

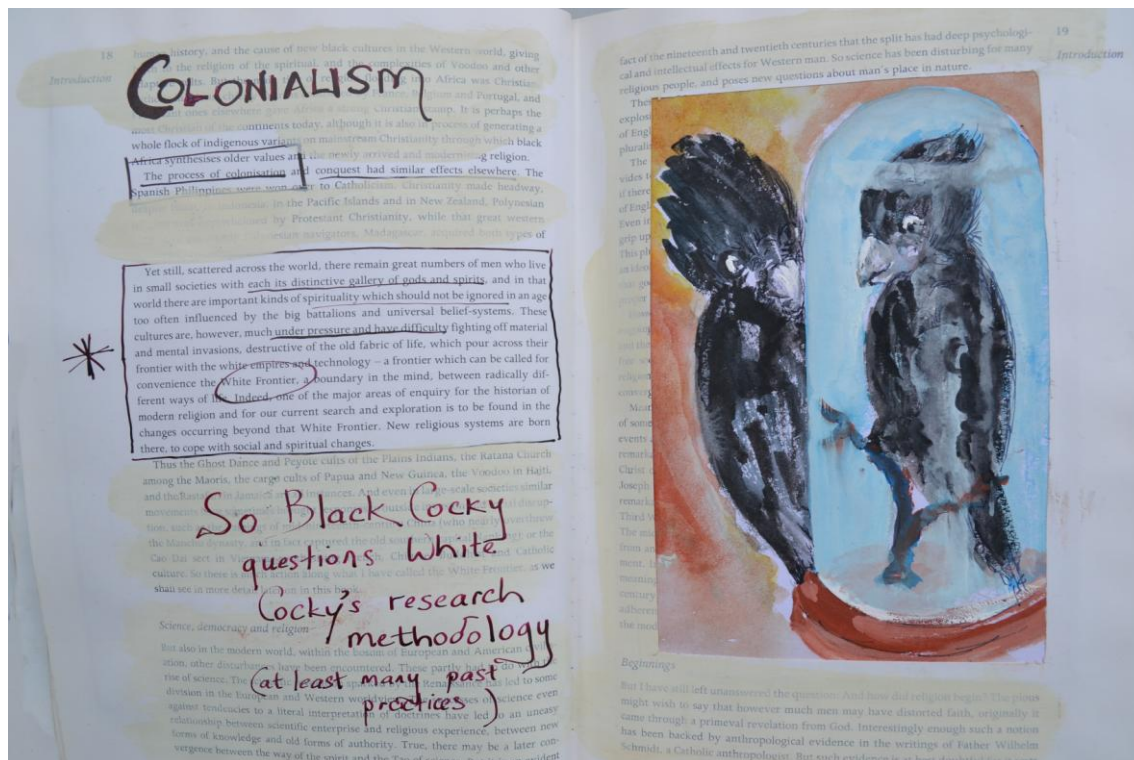


Figure 14: Questionable research methodology

Torres Strait Islander academic Martin Nakata (2007a) is concerned with the way in which Indigenous knowledge has traditionally been documented by non-Indigenous research organisations such as universities. He argues that to stand with Indigenous people is:

to understand what happens when Indigenous knowledge is documented in ways that disembodies it from the people who are its agents, when the “knowers” of that knowledge are separated out from what comes to be “the known”, in ways that dislocates it from its locale, and separates it from the social institutions that uphold and reinforce its efficacy, and cleaves it from the practices that constantly renew its meanings in the here and now (p. 9).

As Nakata states, Western research applies a radically different epistemology from Indigenous people when it separates the knowledge from its context in the land and the people of the land. To engage in this research is therefore to affirm the connection between knowledge and the land, and therefore to engage in the necessary healing that leads to social transformation. Tuhiwai Smith

(2012) argues that an Indigenous research agenda should include transformative outcomes along with healing, decolonisation and mobilisation. As she says, this agenda is “broad in its scope and ambitious in its intent” (p. 122). She notes that Indigenous research is often at odds with Western science, which is supposedly neutral and objective. Tuhiwai Smith and others abhor an approach which assumes the researcher takes a neutral stance. She instead argues that research must lead to social transformation, and be in the interests of the community concerned. I agree but would add that research has implications for all taking part in the research: Mowanjum people, the Boab Network, the ACU and me.

I have also sought to operate within a reciprocal relationship with people from Mowanjum. When the Mowanjum people speak of a reciprocal and sharing relationship, as is often the case with collaboration, they use the term *wurnan*. Donny Woolagoodja states, “Wurnan is just like a gift” (Blundell & Woolagoodja, 2005, p. 31). When women and men go to a meeting, they pass presents; the *wurnan* involves the passing of presents from one to another. However, such reciprocal relationships also apply between humans and the *Wandjinas*. As those who are descendants of the *Wandjinas* repaint the images, they ensure that the world remains fertile as the *Wandjinas* share their gifts with the people and the land. The *wurnan* stands at the centre of the community’s relationship with the land and each other. As anthropologist Tony Redmond (2001) states, “The foundational myths of *Ngarinyin* social life centre on the institution of the *wurnan* and the introduction of the system of institutionalised sharing between moieties as well as between and within clans” (p. 193).

Marcel Mauss (1967) wrote of the issues involved in gifting and exchange in the mid-1920s, influencing later anthropological thought. His study of this custom of exchange argued that it was a widespread phenomenon through many societies. In such practices people are bound by obligations of clan and family to carry on exchange. A recent study by Molm, Takahashi & Peterson (2000) has inquired into the nature of such exchanges, arguing that reciprocal exchanges produce higher levels of trust than binding agreements. The latter are more uncertain, particularly when it is hard to determine the appropriate exchange. I have not taken part in a negotiation, in terms of spelling out what I would do to reciprocate the work involved by members of Mowanjum in my thesis. However, our relationship is based on trust, which in a sense has made it more binding.

The people of Mowanjum have given non-Indigenous people, myself included, substantial gifts and hopefully we have received these appropriately and given in return. Ross Gobby from

the Boab Network expressed his understanding of the nature of a reciprocal relationship in the following conversation:

When we go to Perth we are giving them an insight into our culture and we do everything for them, but when we go back to country the boot's on the other foot. And they give everything to us and we are helpless and powerless and blind without them helping us and show us and guide us and keep us safe (Recorded conversation, 9 July 2011).

Thus to be able to work, research or simply experience an Aboriginal community is based on gift, not right. This attitude counters that of the past, when non-Indigenous individuals or groups saw their work or involvement as a right and did not consider the protocols necessary to ask for this privilege. I continue to be aware that our involvement at Mowanjum is only as good as the continued “grace” of the community.

Principle 11 of the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) Guidelines for Ethical Research (2012) – Benefits, outcomes and giving back – states that Indigenous people should benefit from a research project. My involvement with the people has therefore been greater than a narrow focus on research. My reciprocal gift to Elder Eddie Bear has been to write the history of his family as they moved from their traditional lands, lived at Munja (a government feeding station), worked on pastoral stations then moved to Mowanjum. I see writing this history as a natural obligation in terms of the *wurnan* and gift sharing. I have also regularly responded to a range of requests including assisting with the annual Mowanjum Festival, assisting with cultural matters such as ensuring that the ground was “smoked” when former performers died, chairing meetings and even conducting a funeral. These are all instances where my research practice has been grounded in the principle of reciprocity.

Aboriginal academics are not alone in their critiques of past Western research practices. Research with Indigenous peoples and within Indigenous communities has undergone significant change in the last thirty years or so, reflecting the need for sensitivity and awareness of Indigenous voices in research. Historian James Clifford has been sharply critical of ethnographical practice since his initial writings in the 1980s for similar reasons as Tuhiwai Smith. Clifford traces the formation and breakup of ethnographic authority in twentieth century social anthropology in *The Predicament of Culture* (Clifford, 1988; see also Clifford, 1997 and Clifford and Marcus, 1986). I follow the lead of ethnologist Eric Lassiter (2001), who speaks of the need to read the texts of culture *with* the people in a collaborative arrangement rather than

over their shoulders. Lassiter (2005) developed a model of ethnographic collaboration which acknowledged the role of the American Anthropological Association, El Dorado Task Force Papers. The report argues: “All parties are equal partners in the enterprise, participating in the development of the research design and other major aspects of the program as well, (and) working together toward a common goal” (p. ix).

Lassiter’s work inspired other anthropologists to explore methodologies of collaborative research. For example Luis Guillermo Vasco Uribe and Joanne Rappaport, (2011) and Xochitl Leyva Solano and Joanne Rappaport (2011) write of Colombian collaborative research which involves Indigenous communities and participants in all parts of the process. In so doing they help to rethink fieldwork and ethnographic writing. An Australian example is the work of Liam Brady (2009), who writes of collaboration with Torres Strait Islander communities. He refers to Nakata’s insight that “the processes whereby Indigenous knowledge is being generated are of considerable importance”. The Torres Strait Islander people adopted Western knowledge systems without considering their own notions of identity and world space (Nakata cited in Brady, 2009, p. 37). I agree that consideration of the process is important and underlying these processes is the quality of relating. While these examples illustrate what it means to research collaboratively, I intended to research a collaborative relationship as we encountered the land together. The focus of my presence was always on understanding our relating and research thus evolved as a collaborative relationship.

However, I am conscious of Principle 10 of the AIATSIS Guidelines for Ethical Research (2012), which refers to partnership and collaboration: “Indigenous people have the right to full participation appropriate to their skills and experiences in research projects and processes” (p. 10). I accept this aim in principle, but the practicalities of distance and levels of communication have made this difficult, not to mention that this was an emergent process. Although my time at Mowanjum was short compared to staying a period of months or years, I endeavoured to spend many hours talking with key Elders. For example, it was necessary to talk with Eddie Bear on many occasions about his family story, and in these conversations I had the opportunity to talk with him about my research work. The entire process was difficult, even with key Elders who have a very good command of English language and ideas. This difficulty arises from the gap between an institution such as a university and living in a remote Aboriginal community. The difficulty lies in the translation of ideas, particularly when explaining the demands or objectives of the university. It is equally difficult to bring nuances of the experiences of living and working with Aboriginal people into an academic context. I have felt like the go-between and wondered how to work creatively with this ontological and epistemological divide without doing injustice to

either my Aboriginal friends or creating undue dissonance for a wider audience. In one sense I am a translator, though I accept the difficulties of being unable to learn the various languages involved, adding to this complexity.

In this respect, I have continually sought to dialogue with the people even though conscious of limitations of distance and conceptual differences. Mowanjum people took a key role in the shape of this study by inviting me on the series of journeys which form the basis of the thesis. They also had substantial input into its final presentation. Thus I saw my research as engaging in a long term conversation or dialogue, not only with Mowanjum people whom I accompany *up-country*, but with non-Indigenous people such as the members of the Boab Network, cultural coordinators and rangers who have significant dealings with Mowanjum people. The aim of this dialogue or conversation was not to collect material for some other community such as the university, but in the first place to feed the dialogue back into the communities in which the dialogues occur (Mowanjum and the Boab Network). In response to the critique that Western research has often been one of separation of self from the object of study and dismembered rather than integrated and relating to the whole, I have followed a methodology which has been described as “Academics of the Heart” (Rendon, 2000, p. 6). Rendon’s approach sees research as a relationship centred process which honours diverse ways of knowing and engages in contemplative practice, self-reflection and introspection. This approach sums up my own, particularly with regard to focusing on the relating and engaging in a process that honours the whole person and not simply the intellect.

### 2.3 Stages of the research process

Although I have approached the research journey with an open mind, I have had some markers to guide my thinking. As the journey evolved it became clear that I have three major areas of research:

- **To explore the question of what it means to engage in a cultural interface in the context of land.** It was not my place to speak for Mowanjum people unless they asked me to do this. Rather, I focussed on the trans-cultural space, involving Aboriginal and white people as they travelled together.
- **To research the importance of land, particularly the return to traditional lands, for Mowanjum people.** This research could not, therefore, be neutral or objective, for I wanted to give voice to the people’s dream to return to their traditional lands, often in the face of government and community opposition or indifference.

- **To explore the meaning of collaboration when Aboriginal people become the hosts and non-Aboriginal people the guests.** I was therefore conscious that such collaboration was of a limited term, focussing on the work that we achieved together. Shared work was only a small part of our relating, which includes being and learning as we lived together on the land.

I chose a metaphor which affirms the importance of the land but also recognises these issues of cultural engagement and hospitality on traditional land. I discussed a four stage metaphor of lighting the fire, gathering, cooking and sharing food with Eddie Bear. He suggested that I had left out some critical stages. He reminded me of the importance of moving from one camp site to another and of the practice of burning the land. I therefore conceptualise my research in six stages summarised as follows:

**Many journeys: moving from camp to camp:**

I was invited to participate in a series of journeys, each journey bringing different learning. This was the traditional way – of moving around the country.

**Preparation: establishing the ground for fire:**

One clears the ground and places a circle of stones to contain the fire and add to the heat. This placing of the stones reminds me of the fundamental principles underlying my research, which directly arise from Indigenous research methodology.

**Hunting and gathering:**

The third stage is symbolic of the practice of foraging and gathering research data. This is a process which has occurred for tens of thousands of years in this land. Hunting and gathering is radically different from Western farming. For example, gathering food with a net means throwing the net into the river not knowing what might be caught. I have been open to the unexpected conversations and sharing rather than placing my expectations on the encounter with a rigid set of questions.

**Cooking: integration of the data:**

The cooking process which begins with lighting the fire is an excellent metaphor for that inner process of assimilating experience and gathering insights. Clark Moustakas is particularly helpful in understanding this interior process of cooking. It begins with finding the question or problem that, as Moustakas (1990) states, “is an intense interest, a passionate concern that calls out to the researcher, one that holds important social meanings and personal, compelling implications” (p. 27). The cooking process



takes place over time. I learnt that being with Aboriginal people, particularly in research, involves waiting. Indeed, this waiting took place within me as well, as I waited for the food to be properly cooked within me. I came to understand the significance of a certain experience and its meaning in relation to wider discussions of trans-cultural relating.

### **Sharing the food:**

The intent of cooking is to share the food with the community; so, too, with this research. But sharing involves finding the right time and the right way to share. As I discovered this is not an easy matter. Such sharing must also involve Mowanjum people as well as the academic community.

### **The early season burn off:**

As the Chairperson of the Mowanjum Aboriginal Corporation and my mentor Eddie Bear reminded me, the early season burn off completes the process and initiates a renewal of the land. The latter aspect is the most painful, for it demands discernment as to the material to be included or excluded.

## **2.4 Many journeys: moving from camp to camp**

*To relate to people from Mowanjum often meant journeying with them to those remote places where their ancestors moved around country.*

Mowanjum forebears used to move around country as they hunted for food according to the different seasons. This was not only the practice of Kimberley Aboriginal people, for as anthropologists Ronald and Catherine Berndt (1981) describe, Aboriginal people have always had a relationship with land that meant they moved from place to place. The duty of care meant that particular Elders had responsibility to care for the sites in their lands. In the northern coastal regions, “small groups might remain for varying periods at different camping grounds, working the surrounding areas, and returning fairly regularly to the home camp” (p. 141). I was invited to participate in four journeys and these were included in my research:

**October 2010:** Journey to Majaddin in the North West Kimberley as guest of Eddie Bear and his family (chapter 3).

**May 2011:** Native Title Determination for the *Worrorra* people at *Yalun* (chapter 4)

**October 2011:** Poulton Pool for arts based collaboration with artists from the Mowanjum Arts Centre (chapter 5).

**October 2012:** I returned to Majaddin as Eddie's guest (chapter 6).

## **2.5 Preparation: establishing the ground for fire**

*Fire means so much to Aboriginal people that they could not do without it. People gather in a circle around the fire which is for the calling of people together for cooking, eating and warmth at night. It is used for smoking the people and the land when gathered for important ceremonies. To walk through the fire is to be cleansed and healed. It is around the fire that the stories are told and the Law was taught* (Noongar writer and Elder Betty Pike, Aboriginal Catholic Ministry Melbourne, Order of worship, 8/9/2013).

The first stage of the process of preparing and cooking food for the journey is that of preparing the fire. This is done first thing in the morning, and essential to the good order of the day to follow. With guidance, I would carefully construct the fire place, laying out stones if necessary, gather twigs and leaves to ignite the fire, and larger pieces of wood to be added when the fire was lit. I have approached my research with this mentality, carefully preparing my way with the community. The principles I applied in my relationship with the Aboriginal people of the Kimberley are like placing the stones in a circle on the ground. The stones were placed both to contain the fire, but also to provide the necessary heat to enable the cooking to be effective. Without stones, the heat dissipates. In this respect, I determined that a number of key principles gleaned from Aboriginal thought and understanding would guide my methodology. These principles did not provide me with a map for my journey with people from Mowanjum and the Boab Network, and certainly did not provide a technical guide to how I might undertake this research. They did, however, lead to particular practices that became critical to my work, such as the development of dialogue through conversation, honouring my own reflective response expressed through creative visual and poetic means, and learning what it is to engage in that Deep Listening which underlay the RMIT Indigenous cohort's practice (Brearley, 2010).

### **Principles**

Although the following principles reflect Indigenous research practices, I have determined which are most appropriate to my relating with the Mowanjum people.

- **I seek reciprocal, sharing, and two-way relationships.**

As explained in section 2.2, my approach to research needs to accord with the people's understanding of a reciprocal sharing relationship (the *wurnan*) which is fundamental to their Law and culture. This means that my research must have relevance for the Mowanjum people's concerns and needs and that I should contribute in kind to their community. I therefore agreed to write a family story as well as make myself available for other needs.

- **I undertake dialogue in a spirit of participation and collegiality; this in turn leads to unexpected invitations and understandings.**

This principle follows the notion of a two-way relationship. I have continually sought to dialogue with the people about my research and its implications. This initial dialogue led to the invitations to visit lands.

- **My standpoint is alongside the Mowanjum people, ensuring that their voices and interpretations are included in my writing.**
- **My fundamental research position is to stand with Aboriginal people – Mowanjum people in particular – in their quest for land rights and self-determination.**



Figure 15: Take a stand

Indigenous researchers such as Tuhiwai Smith (2012) posit the importance of research to fulfil the social agendas of Indigenous peoples, including their quests for self-determination and land rights (pp. 108-109). I feel these issues strongly in my relationship with the people of Mowanjum as they endeavour to foster their connection with the land, and through this connection to find renewal, healing and survival in an alien political wilderness. I am concerned that government, private or corporate institutions have often had a counter-agenda to undermine the Mowanjum people's quest for land right and self-determination. My thesis highlights the voices of Mowanjum Elders who

want to share their concern for land. With those Elders' blessings, it will then be my responsibility to share this voice with a wider Australian public.

The following two principles concern the way in which I collected my data, engaging in good relationship with both the land and the people.

- **I seek reciprocal and respectful relationships: to understand the Mowanjum people's protocols of good relationships and to develop practices that accord with these protocols.**

As my research developed it became clear to me that I was researching the nature of our trans-cultural relating. This would not only impact on the ways in which I approached data collection and my collaboration with Mowanjum people in this research. It would also impact on the ways in which I approached my research, in initial discussions and later reflection and critique with Mowanjum people.

- **I am guided by an Aboriginal way of knowing, leading to the practice of listening and seeing in accord with one's relationship with the people and land.**

Aboriginal singer and academic Deborah Cheetham succinctly summarised the Aboriginal approach to learning as a "way of knowing" (personal notes from Symposium, 27 November 2013) which is expressed in the dancing of the dances and singing of the songs. In other words, it is a radically different approach from Western learning which is often based on a one-sided word oriented exercise. She added, "It is by us, it is about us, and it must be of benefit to us". My research cannot fully express this ideal because I am not an Aboriginal person. However, my aim in this research was to extend my capacity to listen as Mowanjum people taught me new ways of listening that enabled me to see and hear the land from a perspective different from my everyday "Western" approach, which at times is cut off from land and the creatures of the land. I have been particularly attentive to the stories shared by people, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. These stories gave me an opportunity to understand people's experiences of both land and community in a unique way. I listened to many stories through this research: stories of the past, of present encounters, of discovery, of loss and of renewal. Such stories give meaning to experience because they often engage themes which are common to many cultures. In a sense they enable one to bridge cultural differences. They also led to the transformation of my thinking, particularly in relationship with the land.

- **Visual arts practice, which is so central to Aboriginal cultures, provides a critical means of dialogue with the people.**

This principle had particular relevance to the way in which I shared my research with others, both within Mowanjum and more broadly. Referring to Cheetham's insights, an Aboriginal way of knowing involves a range of artistic and performance practices. I followed Aboriginal research methodology as outlined by Brearley (2010), which affirmed the importance of visual arts and used it for both reflection on the experience and sharing of my thesis with the Aboriginal people involved.

## 2.6 Hunting and gathering

**As I went with the men of the community, the expeditions would include learning how to fish and diving for turtle when necessary. As time went on, I enjoyed hunting. I overcame a natural reluctance to end a life, particularly something as beautiful and mysterious as a turtle. But, if I were truly to experience what it meant to be with the land, I would need to get past these feelings. In contrast to living in urban Victoria, I was brought into close connection with my food.**

Although the above description seems far from a traditional research methodology, this connection is symbolic of the philosophy underlying my research – namely that everything exists in relationship and research needs to acknowledge this basic truth of existence. The *Worrorra* people hunt the turtle because of their relationship with the turtle. They are not cut off from the whole process of hunting, cooking and sharing their food as non-Indigenous people often are, but intensely involved at all parts of the process. They are in relationship.

In the same way, I have to be aware of relationship issues as I gather data. I spoke with sociologist Jacques Boulet from OASES<sup>1</sup> Graduate School about this matter. Jacques informed me that the word data is the plural of datum, and neuter past participle of the Latin dare, “to give”. I am therefore very aware that to gather data is both to receive a gift and also to offer a gift: a reciprocal transaction. The problem is that the word can be read as “a/the given” – which seems to suggest that it is something “sitting” there just for the taking... or to be taken, “there as such”.

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<sup>1</sup> OASES Graduate School is an independent not-for-profit organisation offering Australia's first Master of Sustainability and social change.

Gathering data can move away from the original meaning and essence of the verb: to give (Personal Conversation with Jacques Boulet, November 2013).

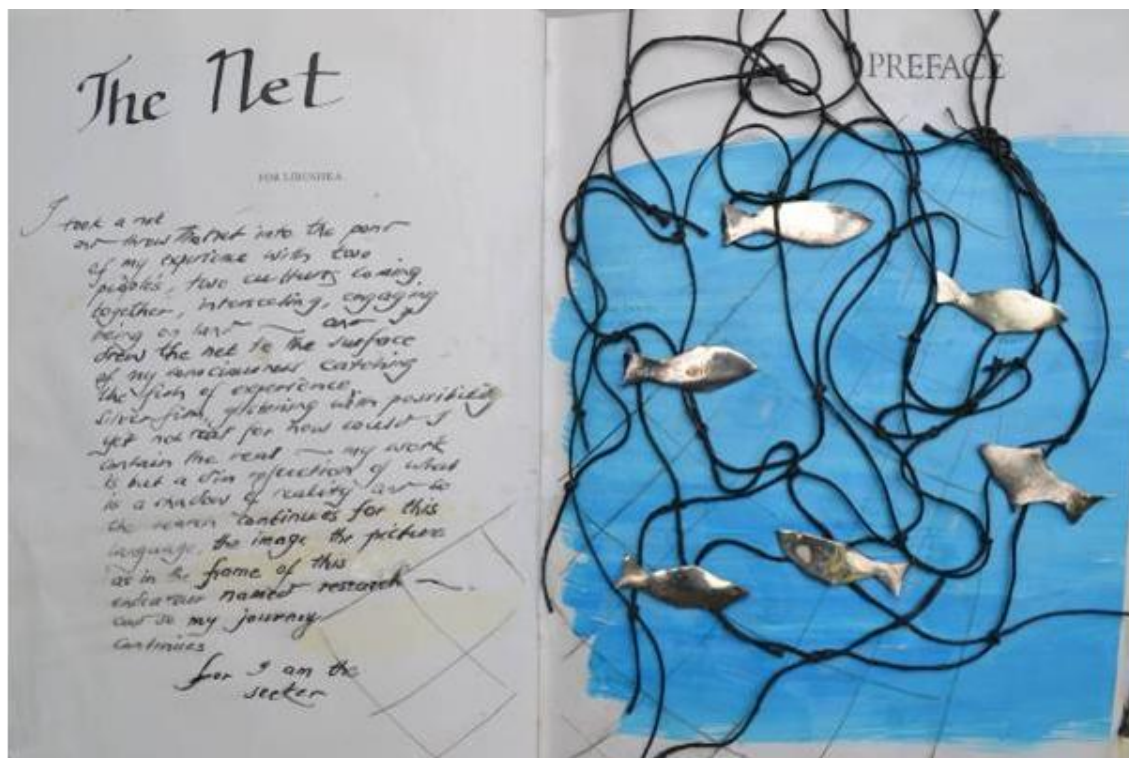


Figure 16: Gathering data and the net

I take part in conversations and in turn reciprocate by giving to the community. In one or two instances, I also purchased gifts as a necessary prelude to the conversation. Like food gathering as we go *up-country*, this is not an emotionally detached, objective process, but necessitates being completely involved in a relationship which includes the sharing of story and of experience. I have therefore approached this data collection with two principles in mind: the need to establish and nurture respectful relationships, and the principle of cultural ways of knowing. Such ways of knowing include deep listening and the power of story.

As my research took shape, it became clear that my work rested on the establishment and nurturing of good relations with the people. Indeed, if the focus of my work were about what it meant to be in relationship, it was imperative that I understood what constituted the process of reciprocal and respectful relationships. Laura Brearley (2010) summarises the research methodology of several Indigenous scholars at RMIT Melbourne. Doris Paton for example argues that the principle of reciprocal and respectful relationships underpins her work as an Indigenous researcher. She speaks of the knowledge and guidance of those Elders past and present who taught her people through stories “how to live together, how to live with the land and to respect the spiritual worlds we [they] share” (Brearley 2010, p. 21). Esme Bamblett similarly argues that





go of my expectations concerning research methods. It was a matter of discovering what it meant to be with the land and in the land. Ironically, focus on research conflicted with this more natural way of being.

## Stories

As I listened, I became aware of many stories that were shared by Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants. This is not new for me. In my previous doctoral work (Hoskin, 1992), I explored the relationship between Mark's story of Jesus and the stories of participants who explored the Gospel with me. It therefore was natural for me to continue to use stories and story-telling in my current research. Stories define people and their relationships with past, present and future. Indeed, story and story-telling is found in many Indigenous as well as non-Indigenous cultures. For example, Native American psychiatrist Lewis Mehl-Madrona speaks of the importance of story for the healing and well-being of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Mehl-Madrona (2007) uses stories as a means of helping people to deal with life issues. Though this is not my purpose, it reminds me that the act of telling a story may be

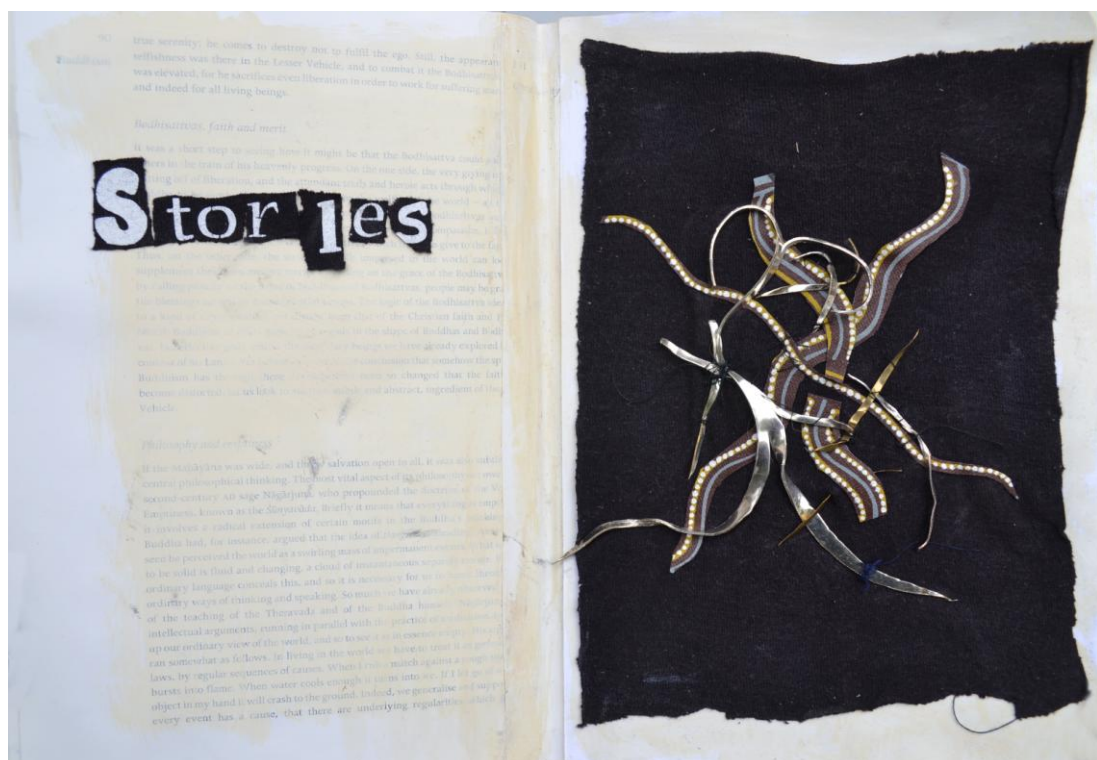


Figure 18: Stories as interwoven threads

transformational, either as a path to healing or finding new relationships within a challenging situation. Furthermore, we define ourselves by and through our stories, constructing a social and economic framework which underlies our lives. Such stories pull together what we have observed



and experienced into a meaningful whole based on plots, characters, actions and the meaning of these actions/events. Thus stories enable us to interpret the world; otherwise it is left chaotic and meaningless. We are then in a position to relate our experience to the wider world and to “inform our audience of how we want to be understood” (p. 53).

Having argued that story is important, the questions remain: what story is being told, who is telling it and have I the right to share it on their behalf? Esme Bamblett (2010) notes that “Narrative researchers listen to and privilege the voices and stories of their research participants as they seek the answer to their research questions” (p. 82). Bamblett also notes that Aboriginal people tell stories for a particular purpose: “they teach valuable truths and are used to hand down oral tradition, to teach the values of the Nation, and to embed respect for Elders in the society” (p. 83). Therefore, throughout the thesis I am conscious that I should not interpret the stories that Elders shared. It is important to privilege their voices and to allow them to guide me in further research, but not to presume any right to use or share their stories.

Trans-cultural interaction continually involves learning and relearning one’s way of being, learning and doing. It would thus be inappropriate to apply a prescriptive research methodology, for it would clash with the setting and the spirit in which this thesis came into being. I have determined that I would focus on three areas in dynamic and ongoing relationship: the meta-narrative (or larger story arising from theoretical research), conversations with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people and auto-ethnography (my personal response to the trans-cultural experience). For the meta-narrative I relate my story of *up-country* journeys with the people to a larger story from other people interacting with Kimberley Aboriginal people and communities. This requires research into the stories of Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relationships in the Kimberley, with particular reference to what it means to be, learn and do in collaborative partnerships. I have asked questions such as: What is the importance of traditional land for Mowanjumb people and does this differ from in the past? Does our experience of collaboration differ from past models of collaboration that existed between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in the Kimberley? However, as I engaged with the land and the people listening to their stories and recording this engagement, the original questions became less appropriate. I began to understand that it was more important to learn from Aboriginal people what it meant to be with the land and their community than to bring my own questions and assumptions about what that might be.

## Conversations

I use the term “conversations” even though these could in other circumstances be called



Figure 19: Conversation across the divide

interviews. My conversations rarely had a particular structure. I applied myself to listening and encouraging respondents to relate their stories and their experiences rather than seeking direct answers to precise questions. The objective of these conversations was to invite the respondents to share their experiences of travelling *up-country* with people from different cultures. I engaged in dialogue at all parts of the process. One of the important aspects of Aboriginal life is that of conversation and dialogue. It was important to keep the Mowanjum Elders informed of how my research is developing.

Oral historian Lorina Barker (2008), a descendent of the Muruwari people, introduces the process of yarning. She undertakes research

as an “insider” and is confused by the ethics and other academic requirements of this role. She writes of the “ivory tower” effect, a metaphor “to describe the process by which people from afar plan and make decisions about a proposed research project or policy, and do so with little or no consultation with the people whom it will affect and with limited understanding of how the chosen community functions” (p. 09.2). I certainly have not wanted to practise such a detached and hierarchical approach to research. I have intentionally sought to use language appropriate to the context: in this case an Aboriginal community on land. Barker speaks of “hanging out” and “yarning” as a culturally appropriate way to undertake research with an Aboriginal community. I agree and have done likewise, again not necessarily by intent but naturally because that is the appropriate way of relating.

Yarning is a form of dialogic inquiry. Such inquiry, according to Gordon Wells, (1999) involves “knowing with and for others”, which implies a collaborative understanding of learning (p. 92). He speaks of knowing rather than knowledge which takes account of six differing modes of knowing (p. 89). Such knowing and learning is not purely a cognitive process but embedded in

action, involving the body and the mind. Dialogic knowledge building is done with others as an active process of meaning making. He describes a spiral of knowing processing through experience, information, understanding and leading to knowledge building. Such a process leads to transformation of the individual relating to the world.

Yarning is a methodology used in a variety of ways for many purposes. Barker collects oral histories as does Indigenous historian Cheree Dean (2010), who states that there is no single definition of yarning. Its strength is its flexibility and adaptation to the particular needs of the research. Yarning both nurtures relationships and relies on good relating. It employs an informal approach which may seem to detract from the formalities of gathering research data. However, as I experienced, such formalities as an interview sheet are themselves a distraction when dealing with Aboriginal people. I have found it far easier to be spontaneous and to see yarning as a conversation with no particular expected outcome.

Yarning has been used in group sessions with Aboriginal people with diverse intentions, such as a focus group seeking to reduce smoking (Lisa Wood et al, 2008), psychotherapeutic (David Vicary and Brian Bishop, 2005), and reconstruction of identity (Jennifer Sabbioni, 1996). I have not used group yarning when dealing with Aboriginal people in this research as the occasions did not easily arise, but explored this in my relationship with members of the Boab Network. This was either in the car or around the table as we reflected together on our experience *up-country* and future work with the people of Mowanjum. However, I used the principle of an informal spontaneous conversation generally in my relating with all participants – Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal.

I digitally recorded a variety of conversations using a zoom digital recorder (H4n); on several occasions I used a digital notebook as a backup. This produced inferior sound, but the voices were still audible. The major difficulty of these recordings is that they often occurred outdoors. It is the Aboriginal way. This meant that extraneous noises were included and the quality of the recording was often marred by wind interference. In one special case, the respondent asked me to go with him to the swamp lands to tape a session on land rights. This was an important step consistent with the theme of the conversation. It also recognised the fact that Indigenous people were in control of what they wanted to share and where they would share this information and story. I purposefully avoided a formal interview style of conversation. Rather, I relied on my experience as a listener, and sought to tape a conversation rather than an interview. I was therefore able to follow the flow of the conversation rather than wanting answers to a pre-determined agenda.

## Personal experience

I became very aware that I was an instrument for data collection, even though I may not have been aware of it at times. It has been my lifetime practice to keep journals of special journeys or retreats. I therefore wrote of my experience using a portable computer. I would write about the experience, my emotional response to the experience and often add a poem or prose to give it a wider dimension. As a visual artist, I also keep visual notes, some of which led to the visual artefacts accompanying this research. However, like the bee (see figure 20), I set out to gather nectar, in this case experience. I would collect this experience both consciously and unconsciously to then be included in the process of cooking.



Figure 20: The bee and the art of “bee-ing”

## 2.7 Cooking: Integration of the data

*The first task is to light the fire, then when the flames had settled one could place the food on or in the fire. A common approach to the cooking up-country was to wrap the fish in foil with a bit of lemon to garnish. In traditional cooking the fish would be simply laid in the fire or the coals and the flesh eaten from within the fish, leaving the outer skin and scales untouched.*

The fourth part of the process of food making and sharing is cooking, that of placing the food on or in the fire. With the advantage of pots and pans, beef is now boiled for a long time. This would not have been possible in traditional cooking when the game would have been placed in the fire. I noted the difference between grilled slices of beef and those cuts that had been boiled over many hours. The latter were soft and edible while the former were often too tough to eat. Like cooking, time is required for the initial idea/insight to take hold, the gathered data to be integrated and the new insights to come to light.

The metaphor of cooking speaks of a reflective process such as auto-ethnography. Keyan Tomaselli, Lauren Dyll & Michael Francis (2008) begin their informative article on the process of auto-reflexive and Indigenous ethnography with the words: “You will be changed” (p. 347). The cooking metaphor speaks of transformation and my work is an account of my own transformation through these four journeys. The authors speak of making sense of an empirical mess. I can certainly relate to this thinking because I have intentionally spread my net widely and have not sought to control the conversations with a list of predetermined questions. Rather, I allowed the conversations and my own experience to settle within me and waited for the insights to come. In this way my research is a participative inquiry that includes my own reflection and change in response to this engagement as well as those with whom I have journeyed.

I like how Hawaiian researcher Kü Kahakalau (2004) chose to explore this process of transformation with insights from Clark Moustakas’ heuristic methodology. He argues that “heuristics aligns itself best with native ways of learning and knowing” (p. 21). This methodology assumes that the investigator has a direct and personal involvement with the phenomenon being investigated. Kahakalau takes Moustakas’ interior method further by creating an action outcome, creating a new model of education. I thus entered the cooking phase of the process with an acute awareness of what it meant to feel. As psychologist Sandy Sela-Smith argues, Moustakas’ methodology allowed her to enter the last frontier, namely of the self that feels. Sela-Smith states:

This method requires that the participant-as-researcher focus on the feeling dimension of personal experience to discover meanings embedded therein. Perhaps, for the first time in human science research, discovery of both the experience and I-who-feels is possible in ways that conventional observation, description, explanation, discussion, or reflection could never provide.... Such a descent into one’s feeling begins with the formulation of a question: “a passionate concern that calls out to the researcher” (Sela-Smith, 2002, p. 63).

This is part of the unease which is often beyond conscious explanation, but continues through the cooking phase until it is resolved. I explore what it means to undertake this personal journey into an unknown space and with people whom I cannot fully know. *Heuristic* methodology deals with the life experience of the researcher and therefore assumes that I am a participant in this research. Moustakas (1994) argues that my life experience and that of those who participate in my research “is not a text to be read or interpreted, but a comprehensive story that is portrayed in vivid, alive, accurate, and meaningful language and that is further elucidated through poems, songs, artwork, and other personal documents and creations” (p. 19). Dare I trust my intuitive way of processing the material gathered? I found a resonance with this approach.

Moustakas (1990, p. 27) outlines six phases which guide his research, including: the initial **engagement** which is the formulation of the question (or in my terms the lighting of the fire); **immersion** into the topic and question (in my terms the journey from camp to camp and the foraging); **incubation** (a process of cooking), leading to **illumination**; then **explication** (sharing); and culmination of the research in a **creative synthesis** (which in my terms is the final integration of my research with the pre-season burn). I have been reluctant to approach this work with a rigid attention to the stages that Moustakas has developed. That would be artificial and not in accordance with the mystery of cooking. It was helpful to consider that my initial question was clarified in the fire of my experience. It changed over time because I had consciously and unconsciously followed the guidance of people from Mowanjum as we encountered land. My initial approach to the research was to create an arts based collaboration resulting in an exhibition. This idea fell through. My research topic changed from an initial inquiry in an art based collaboration which I might organise, to responding to the invitation of the people to encounter their lands in a collaborative relationship. New questions arose in response to this invitation. As my research questions changed, so did my approach to the experience itself. I had been attentive to the need for walking alongside the people. This meant not merely reporting their opinions and stories accurately, but entering deeply into their lives. It was stepping through the door of experience to join with them as they encountered their lands in their way.

I was allowing the power of relationship with the people and the land to have its effect on me. I then waited for moments of illumination during which the inner awareness burst through. Such awareness could lead to a change in understanding and behaviour which, as Moustakas (1990) notes: “is governed and experience is determined by the unique perceptions, feelings, intuitions, beliefs, and judgments housed in the internal frame of reference of a person. Meanings are inherent in a particular world view, an individual life, and the connections between self, other, and world” (p. 32). Through my relationship with both the people and the land, I learnt to let go

into this deeper process that would bring me new understandings and insights. I could also see it happening with other non-Aboriginal people (of the Boab Network), and this was affirmed in the conversations that took place on the land and when we returned to the town.

In accord with Moustakas' understanding, a new way of seeing and listening began to take effect within me and members of the Boab Network and this altered our relationships with the people and the land. This process was transformative, leading to personal changes and thus in the way in which I approached my research. My research thus records these changes both for myself and for those non-Aboriginal people who accompanied me. Where possible, I have also noted the changes for Aboriginal people in respect to collaborating with non-Indigenous people such as myself. Sela-Smith (2002), summing up Moustakas' methodology, adds that each phase of the journey is uncharted territory, and "the ground is not formed until the inquirer creates both the territory and the path by surrendering to the unknown and then walks the territory to discover what is there. The goal of heuristic self-research is to come to a deeper understanding of whatever is calling out from the inside of the self to be understood" (p. 64). My research in this cooking stage represented an opportunity to be with that which was calling out from within me. I therefore sought to convey a "comprehensive story that is portrayed in vivid, alive, accurate and meaningful language and that is further elucidated through poems, songs, artwork and personal documents and creations" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 19).

The cooking, then, is the reflection on the stories gathered over time, and their incorporation into a larger story presented in this thesis. This was not simply a cut and paste exercise but arose out of the integration which naturally took place in this longer process of cooking. I began to bring various shared conversations and experiences together when I had a better understanding of their relationship. Cooking then is the time for journaling, to write my responses to the enquiry questions from various vantage points in time. In this process of journaling/writing, I revisited my source material and if necessary sought additional references or conversations. This process incorporates Moustakas' concept of indwelling, in which I take aspects of the text, my own experience and the conversations and seek to understand them from a variety of nuances, textures, facts and meanings. Moustakas (1990) defines indwelling as turning inward to find a "deeper, more extended comprehension of the nature or meaning of a quality or theme of human experience" (p. 24). This process of indwelling is conscious and deliberate for Moustakas, but I also applied it in my art work and poetic expression to seek intuitive meaning that I may have missed in my rational analysis,

## 2.8 Sharing the food

*I would cook (integrate) food after an up-country journey, and then after digesting what had been produced or sharing it with others, return to the gathering in a new journey or visit to Mowanjum. I found that that there was a risk of sharing partially cooked food.*

The intention of cooking is to produce food for oneself and for others. This is the fifth stage of the process, but not the final stage. The risk lies in sharing undercooked food. This was particularly evident when I applied for a paper to be published in a journal dedicated to Decolonising Action Research. I share the following experience because it raised significant issues for me about my research and its applicability within an Action Research Framework. The experience illustrates the problem of trying to share too soon or, in other words, the danger of undercooked food.

I delivered a paper to the World Congress of Participatory Action Learning and Action Research in 2010. This paper represented the very beginning of my journey of inquiry and research. The paper loosely described what it meant to be a volunteer working for a decade with the Mowanjum Arts Centre and those related to it. The paper was critiqued for publication and failed miserably according to the standards set by the referee. The paper was seen as moderately well-grounded in the world of practice, though the referee argued that I described general volunteering activities in contrast to “practice” which needs to be precise. The problem at the beginning of research such as this, was to develop a theory, framework and principles consistent with the respective journeys. At the stage of writing the paper, my theoretical framework was very weak. Should I have waited for my ideas to be resolved before writing a paper such as this? It was unfortunate that I could not share a snapshot of my process with the help of the adjudicator rather than being judged by a deficiency in theory. He/she also demeaned my role as volunteer, arguing that a volunteer role is inferior to a research or paid role. The adjudicator missed the significant point that a decade of volunteering opened the door to a participatory action project precisely because it built the necessary relationships with the people. He/she also ignored a significant criticism of many non-Indigenous research projects – they assume that relationships can be built overnight. He/she also questioned the absence of Mowanjum people's direct voice. Perhaps the adjudicator's comments were constructive because they cautioned me against presenting “undercooked food”. I certainly learnt that it would take more time to work collaboratively within a research model, even though I had many years of working collaboratively with the people around the Mowanjum Festival. Ironically, within a month or two after writing and delivering the paper, I



was asked to work collaboratively on the family history of an Elder. This work emerged from the work that I had been describing in this paper. However, it would take me several journeys and more reflection to be able to place my work within the context of “participatory action research”.

I was aware of the importance of art in Aboriginal society, particularly after many years of assisting with the Mowanjum Festival. It seemed natural therefore for me to use visual art in my own integrative process. I had produced many works of art in my years of working as a volunteer with the people. I did this because art offered me a spontaneous way of dealing with the many conflicts and tensions that arose as a result of my journeying with Aboriginal people. I continued this practice, producing key works of art as commentaries on each of the chapters in this thesis. I saw my thesis as a deconstruction of prior attitudes and understandings of what it means to relate trans-culturally, and then a reconstruction out of my experience with individuals and families from Mowanjum. I physically and creatively dismembered a book then recreated images that accorded with insights that were occurring to me. Sometimes the artwork preceded my conscious awareness and I would discover these new insights in the images/sculptures that I had produced. Accordingly, I present artefacts which visually record these insights along with my written thesis. Images from the altered books together with images of sculptures and other visual art are included in this thesis. I also include a CD including the two altered books in digital form. Such work is one way in which I can share the food (research) that has been prepared.

## **2.9 The early season burn off**

*The traditional practice of intentional burning is now being reinstated under the direction of the Traditional Owners. This ensures that the land continues to be fertile, reducing the effect of unwanted pests and the danger of uncontrolled wild fires.*

The final phase of the food cycle is the burning. Fires are lit at the end of the wet season when the grasses are high but the area still moist. To do otherwise and to wait until the end of the dry season is to risk wild fires which can be extremely destructive. According to Bill Gammage (2011), this practice of intentional burning of the country has been adopted by non-Indigenous settlers all over Australia, though its significance was unknown to them. This traditional aspect of early season burning has been reintroduced in the Kimberley and other areas of Northern Australia (Vigilante, 2001). The people would burn the country to promote various kinds of flora conducive to their nomadic lifestyle. This meant that game would be attracted to different areas in different seasons and easily caught. What then of the burning that needs to take place in this

research? I stated that my data collection was like using a net to trap all that came my way. This meant that I had numerous conversations, my own personal reflections as well as a myriad of references to consider. To apply the burning is to discern what is to be included or left aside. This burning also followed the pre-submission seminar at the Australian Catholic University (ACU) where, with the help of critical comments, I gained a new perspective and understanding of this work. I applied this critical and supportive review to the work, distinguishing the important issues from the tangential.

## **2.10 Summary**

I have presented my methodology noting that it emerged from conversations and journeys with Aboriginal people as they encountered their traditional lands. This reverses that traditional Western approach where methodology is determined at the beginning of research and strictly applied. I, and others from the Boab Network, decided to wait to be invited by individuals or families from Mowanjum into a collaborative relationship. This approach resonates with Aboriginal research methodology in which the basis is to forge reciprocal and respectful relationships, learning what it is to be with the people in their lands. From reading Aboriginal research methodology I determined a number of key principles to apply to my work.

I was invited to take part in a series of journeys which meant moving from camp to camp. Each journey required preparations and involved hunting and gathering, lighting the fire and the actual cooking of the meat or fish, then sharing. However, these actions became metaphorical for the research process, including the early season burn as I reflected on and reconfigured my data and insights. In sharing this map of the process I have sought to explain the relationship between the principles which I developed to guide my work and their relevance to particular stages. In the course of this research I also worked on Eddie's family history as they moved from Majaddin through to Mowanjum over some forty years since the late 1920s. This added research gave me additional understanding of the importance of land to Eddie and his family. I came to understand how the my first journey to Majaddin (chapter 3) was of critical importance to Eddie and his family as they reclaimed their land, seeking new ways of relating to it. It has been personally rewarding to have been invited to be part of this long term process. I left translating this research process into a non-Indigenous academic context until the journeys were complete. With the benefit of many conversations, my personal journals and substantial reflection, I constructed a map of the research process which may be applicable to others. This map would focus the three questions exploring the meaning of collaboration outlined in chapter 1: what is the collaborative

process, how might I describe the relationship involved in collaboration and what, eventually will be the product of this collaboration?

### Chapter 3:

#### *Up-country* collaboration

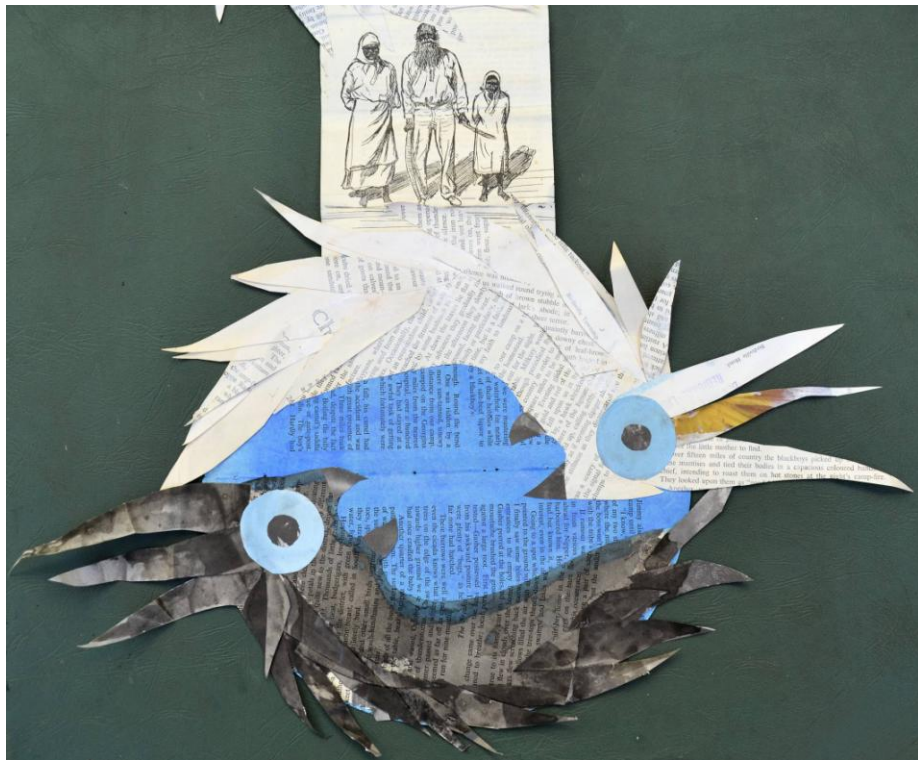


Figure 21: White cocky in control

### 3. 1 Introduction to an *up-country* journey

The Mowanjum people have a long history of white dominated collaborative relationships, whether as a result of the Presbyterian Mission, government policy or involvement in the pastoral stations. In a sense the people have had to collaborate in order to survive. The image of the white cocky above the black cocky (figure 21) represents such a white dominated relationship. It was my intention through this research not to repeat this domination, but to discover what it might mean to relate to Aboriginal people in a different way. Such an opportunity arose in October 2010, when Eddie Bear invited some members of the Boab Network and me to participate in a collaborative *up-country* journey with his family as they returned to their traditional lands.

In this chapter I present a description of our *up-country* journey with Eddie Bear and his family to his traditional lands at Majaddin in 2010.<sup>1</sup> This journey had a number of stages, beginning with the invitation and Eddie's accompanying vision (section 3.3). We collaborated as we prepared for the journey, sharing the organisational load (section 3.4). A series of physical, spiritual and philosophical crossings followed (section 3.5). To travel to a remote place such as Majaddin is to go *up-country*, providing both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples with a radically different way of living from that at Mowanjum or in a capital city. We then spent time at Majaddin as guests of the traditional owners. Being a guest changed the nature of our collaboration (section 3.6). I began to learn what it meant to be in relationship with the land and the people of the land as we worked collaboratively and participated in a hunt (section 3.7). This relationship also involved yet another crossing as we encountered traditional sacred sites (sections 3.8-3.11). We began to experience the Other: that which is clearly beyond our normal understandings and cultural background. This might include the sacred Other – the *Wandjina* – or that aspect of Aboriginal culture which is mysterious if not incomprehensible. Finally, I returned home and reflected on this experience (sections 3.12-3.13).

The Majaddin trip opened a door for me, not only by providing a basis for my research, but as it turned out, led to a further calling: to take part in that long term vocation of being with Eddie and his family as they struggled to take care of and protect their lands. This journey to Majaddin began collaboratively, but the encounter with Aboriginal traditional lands changed the nature of our relationship. We entered a host/guest relationship, in which we the non-Indigenous participants were the guests and the Mowanjum people our hosts on their land and their terms.

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<sup>1</sup> I also include some material published in the refereed journal *Limina* (Hoskin, 2013).

This host/guest model radically reversed the power relationship inherent in many past Indigenous/non-Indigenous collaborations.

### 3.2 The Invitation

In this initial trip to Majaddin I was not the only guest, for this trip involved at least seventy people: families from Mowanjum, rangers, members of the Boab Network and several other community members. The trip evolved from conversations with Eddie Bear from Mowanjum and Ross Gobby from the Boab Network. The two men and their communities had been working in a collaborative relationship with the objective of providing a program for Mowanjum children and youth. Eddie invited the Network and other families in the Mowanjum community to join with him and his family for several days in the remote location at Majaddin. I asked Ross why it was important for him and other Boab Network people to undertake this journey. He replied, “The original motivation was to provide a way to collaborate... so that the Mowanjum people could go back to country in a way that is better than if they go themselves”. He talked to several Mowanjum people about this and they replied that the presence of the Boab Network changed the dynamic for them. As Ross added, “We are like a neutral broker, which changes the dynamics within the various groups with Mowanjum” (Recorded conversation, 9 July 2011). We can relate across those dynamics which affect relationships between families, and thus reduce any potential for conflict.

The Majaddin journey set the stage for my research. My personal objectives for this initial trip to Majaddin included producing a visual story of the journey for the people of Mowanjum, to support the children, to take photos of what they thought interesting or engaging and to record my own experience. As I did not have the approval of the ACU Human Research Ethics Committee at that stage, these projects were unable to be included in my research. However, I wanted to talk with Elders such as Eddie about possibilities for the future in order to clarify my research in terms of the university’s ethics requirements. This initial encounter helped me to determine my future direction, namely to focus on *up-country* collaborations. However, Eddie also asked me to write his family story and I saw this as a reciprocal gift to the Mowanjum community. This became an important complement to my research, as it was yet another collaborative opportunity. Through the course of the journey I also realised that my research was more an apprenticeship in which I was learning how to relate within a trans-cultural relationship and, of course, to relate to the land. I would be open to Eddie’s leading and continue to learn from him as I had learnt from other Mowanjum Elders in the past. Eddie and his family offered the gift of hospitality while we (the Boab Network participants) received hospitality. This began my learning of what it means to

relate empathically to the people and the land. This is both the learning of empathy and the empathy of learning.

Later when I received the approval of the ACU Human Research Ethics Committee, I set about speaking with some of the people who had undertaken this journey about their experience of the Majaddin trip. Participants included our host Eddie Bear (*Ngarinyin*), Gordon Barunga (*Worrorra*), Ross Gobby, Keith Bakker and Libby Weeda from the Boab Network, Peter Croll from the Mowanjum Arts Centre and Ian Obern from Dambimangari Aboriginal Corporation. Two years later, I had a conversation with Libby, who went on this journey as a sixteen year old. She noted that it was a “once in a life time opportunity” for her; at the time she had no understanding of how much of a privilege it was and the impact that it would have on her life (Recorded conversation, 20 July 2013). I, too, could not foresee what would occur as a result of this journey. It would give me a profound understanding of the importance of hospitality, of being a guest in the Other’s land: a different culture and spirituality to mine. It also reinforced my understanding of the importance of place and relationship with place.

### **3.3 Eddie’s vision for Majaddin**

When I obtained ethics clearance I spoke with Eddie Bear about the history of his involvement with Majaddin and the reason why it was so important to him and his family (Recorded conversation, 13 July 2011). He had obtained funding through the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) when he and his family began reconnecting to his traditional land in the 1990s: “ATSIC was started; that was time when they been getting back. They were allowing people to go back to their country. Yes and that’s when I got interested in it too, to get back to country. The old people were still alive and I was starting to go back there. But I was not really staying there”. Eddie kept this initiative going by taking the “little ones up” every two or three years. I asked Eddie why it was so important for him to return. He replied, “Well, the old people wanted to go back there, so I wanted to keep the dream alive, and just to get up there. I wanted to go there for our young ones to be interested in it too”. I then asked him why it was important that he make this available both to us and the wider Mowanjum community. He replied: “It was real something, you know, to see other people look at my country and even the stories told by our old people could live again, non-Indigenous people to understand and even our young ones too, to understand them”. Eddie has a vision of Majaddin being a special place not only for the Mowanjum community, but for non-Indigenous people as well. I asked him about his vision for the future. His vision included living at Majaddin, but keeping the surrounding lands of particular historical or cultural significance uninhabited. Eddie explained: “You know that area where we

live now, we are going to live there. But (the) surrounding area, the *Wandjina* area and where the fighting thing occurred, we just leave it as it is. We don't do anything on it". This place was where two clans met to fight. The women stepped in and stopped the fight. The men could not look at them because they were not allowed to look at their *rambarr* (mother-in-laws).

Eddie said that he wanted to share his country with others. He cautioned, "But not just go in there and do what they like with it". Eddie was very conscious of the *Wandjinas* on country and this is a reason why the land must be kept intact. This means keeping to the proper protocols. He told me about an incident that occurred on a previous trip to Munja. Just up the road from Majaddin, someone had been affected by the *Wandjinas*. Eddie explained the process of welcome: "So when we first go in there, when we have a new mob we are going to say [to the *Wandjina*], 'We bring them. We bring this mob here'. But say it in language. *We're bringing this mob to look at our country. Don't hurt them.* That's what the old lady said. It is about the *Lai-lai*".

Eddie spoke about the importance of the words spoken to the *Wandjina*, which is part of the necessary protocol for a visit to the caves. We were included in the welcome so that the *Wandjina* would know that we were coming to visit them, too. As we talked, it became clear that Eddie took his hosting role very seriously: "I thought it was special but, (silence) for me, it is like being the person for that country. I am the Elder of that country, and, to see people to come and, and feel good about people coming to look at my country and me speaking about it. This is like what the old people told me., as they spoke to the kids". This consciousness of being host and Elder for the country came from watching his father and other old ones, for they had taken Eddie there as a boy. He said: "Some of the old people, when they started to talk about that place and when they take us there they feel like I do now. I got my kids here now and they, not just me talking about it, they are right here, in their country, you know and that's what I felt, my old ones". This conversation affirms that land for Eddie and his people is more than a material reality; it is deeply imbued with spirit, with those who have gone before and with story.

It was an extraordinary privilege for Eddie to invite us, the members of the Boab Network, to this special place along with other Aboriginal guests such as *Worrorra* Elder Gordon Barunga. I asked Gordon for his thoughts on what it meant for us to join with the Mowanjum people on the trip (Recorded conversation, 11 July 2011). Gordon replied that we "Learn about our country and everything. You [we] do out there what the old people used to do". He was happy to share their culture; indeed, he stated, "I'm glad when you mob came".



### 3.4 Preparation

To prepare for a journey involving seventy people and unknown terrain is intense and demanding. In a real sense, we saw this as our major contribution to the collaborative relationship between Eddie and ourselves. Our preparation involved obtaining substantial funding for the journey as well as coordinating with a diverse range of people to organise food supplies, equipment and vehicles. The trip arose from the collaboration of many non-Indigenous people including Peter Croll, cultural coordinator at the Mowanjum Arts Centre, and participants from the Floreat Uniting Church in Perth. For Peter, one of the more enjoyable aspects of his job is organising back to country trips (Recorded conversation, 9 July 2011). He deals with the logistical side of sourcing funding for these trips, as well as engaging volunteer help, food, fuel and accommodation. Peter spoke of:

The huge costs involved with the fuel and food and being able to sustain themselves out there for a reasonably long period of time. You would be limited and only be able to get a certain number of people out there like your own, maybe, your own immediate family. Whereas on these *back to country* trips you can get a lot of people who have connections to that area.

I asked Peter what *collaboration* meant for him in this particular journey. He spoke of all the behind the scenes work that went into the trip: “Well, I have to liaise with community members to get an idea of who wants and who needs to go. Or to find who is important in the scheme of things, to find whose country it is in the scheme of things. It is important that they go”. Peter arranged with the *Wilinggin* rangers to see how many vehicles they were taking. They would bring staff, firewood and support vehicles in case vehicles broke down. I then asked Peter what would have been the greatest challenge of the trip. He shared a number of challenges including finding a suitable time, talking with the people to see if they were available and whether they were healthy enough to go. He offered the following image to sum up the many behind the scenes tasks: “It is like taking a circus on the road. Because if you end up in between towns you’ve gotta be geared up for it”. Peter’s account speaks of collaboration as action focussed, although it is also clearly based on his good relationship with all those concerned. We would not have achieved this major trip without significant work from many people – Mowanjum families together with non-Indigenous support.

### 3.5 Crossings

The journey to Majaddin involved a distinctive *crossing* as we travelled to a remote location in the Kimberley to encounter *Ngarinyin* culture and caves in a profound way. Such a crossing may be physical, but is also emotional. This sense of the *crossing* began as I drove from Mt Barnett on the Gibb River Road to Mt Elizabeth Station. I was “out of my comfort zone” not only in driving a four wheel drive vehicle, but also in crossing through a dirt track in the far north of Australia. I was responsible for driving a lot of children and mothers with babies. I had to concentrate; driving on a bush track at night with minimal visibility is a very difficult task. I had to stay close to the car in front so that I could see where I was going, yet this closeness exposed us to the dust. I had to be careful about kangaroos and cows wandering onto the road, not to mention the wriggling mass of children in the vehicle without seatbelts. In fact, the Boab Network has since resolved that we do not take children or adults without seatbelts even on *up-country* journeys. The road, or more specifically the track, was not too cut up, as tracks in this part of the world can be. The real difficulty was dealing with the possibility of an unpredictable event, such as a tyre blow-out or an encounter with wildlife. Fortunately, nothing happened and we reached the safety of Mount Elizabeth Station. It is very strange to see lights after such a long journey through the bush, and with the lights come signs to follow the road to the river and the camping ground.

The next day, we left Mt Elizabeth Station through a locked gate. This gate is a threshold which, as philosopher Edward Casey (2011) recounts, is a place through which strangers enter from elsewhere to come to a new land. Casey writes of the *Stranger's Gate* which symbolically speaks of such a threshold. There is a phrase “chiseled into the red sandstone wall next to an entrance on the West side of Central Park, New York”. This phrase remembers those who have literally come from the West (p. 39). The phrase remembers those who began a *rite de passage* leading to an encounter with “a new culture, a new language, a new people with their particular customs and mores, disciplines and rituals” (p. 41). As Casey notes, this open gate contrasts with the checkpoints that the people actually encountered; it is “saying in effect: Welcome! Come on in!” (p. 42). Our threshold or “Stranger's Gate” was the land itself. The journey over and through land is open yet it is also a threshold marking the transition from one kind of society and culture to another. It is an edge marking the boundary where hospitality might begin or end.

Such an edge is *Magpie Jump-up*. This is a watercourse that descends from the plateau to the plains. We carefully drove down this watercourse which is able to be navigated only in dry weather. This crossing marked the edge of Eddie's homelands. Beyond this point we were reliant

on Eddie's hospitality and care. Libby noted that this was a moment of transition: "Especially at Magpie Jump-up, it really resonated with me. That was the point where I encountered the literal space between leaving part of you behind and entering into a completely new space. ... I felt like you expanded. I was seeing it from somewhere different" (Recorded conversation, 20 January 2013). There was obviously a transition for Libby, but paradoxically, even though she was allowed access and included completely, she was very conscious of not entering fully into their social state. In a sense she remained in a liminal state.

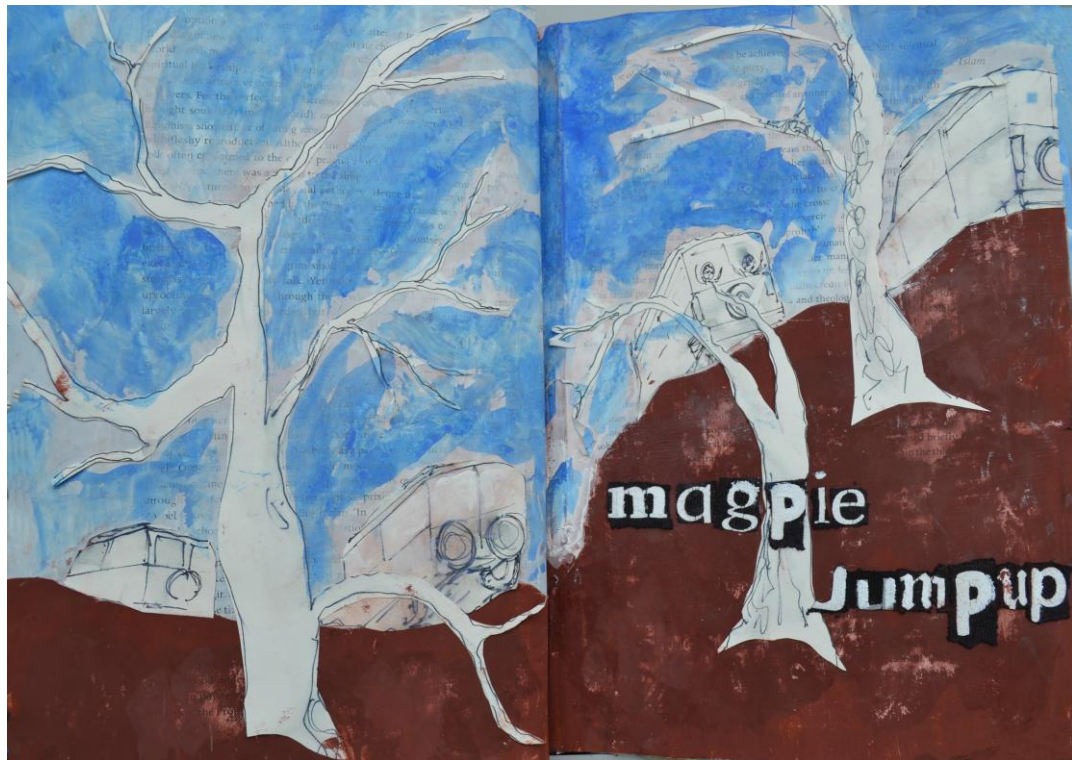


Figure 22: Magpie Jump-up

I have argued that such a crossing has physical and emotional implications. It is also political. Fiona McAllan (2013) explores such political issues in a series of papers on the continuing "ideological and historic-political structures that suppress Indigenous voice in the 'Australian situation'" (p. 1). She asks the question of whether Australia is bound to continue its practice of colonialism, of forgetting past injustice and reinforcing a divisive approach to land ownership and control. She notes that "Indigenous relations remain people- and land-centric" (p. 62), while colonialism relies on the objective control of the Crown which supports land ownership rather than the belonging to land as in customary Law.

McAllan shares her own family's history of place and migration (p. 115). This history partly resonates with my own family migrating from Kent, Cornwall and Scotland. As McAllan

states, “the British Isles and Europe have long histories of migrations and invasions” resulting in an indigeneity which is “far from clear” (p. 116). We, have *come here*, have inherited a disconnection with the land and place in contrast to Indigenous Laws and practices particular to place as is experienced in this journey to Majaddin. Our background and ancestral history is radically different to those traditional owners who are *from here*. We therefore have a choice, namely to continue past colonialism which ignores Indigenous Law and sovereignty or to acknowledge and recognise “that indigenous Laws of place remain in effect in this country (indeed in all countries) and that all people have responsibilities in relation to them” (p. 119). This crossing into Majaddin brings this choice and question into focus.

Drawing from Derrida and cultural studies academic McAllan argues that “a divided self has forgotten its place in relation to the other” (p. 123). That is, we the colonisers have forgotten that we displaced Aboriginal people. We continue to regard their culture and Law of place to have little relevance to our society, rather than explore the far reaching issues arising from a network of relating that occurred between the various places in Australia. David Mowaljarlai shared this network in *Yorro Yorro*, making the point that Australia was like a body with many different parts, all interconnected. This is a “pattern thinking, as embodied situated thinking, [which] remains clear-eyed about its situatedness and interdependency” (p. 132).

Thus, as I crossed into Majaddin, I made a physical, emotional, political crossing that ironically brought me into a deeper awareness that with family roots in Britain and what it meant living in Melbourne. In McAllan’s terms I came from “there” as I journeyed with the traditional owners. Yet, I become very conscious of the paradox that I who come from “there” am welcomed in their country. I also become conscious that members of my culture have helped to displace Eddie’s family from their homelands, and in the process broken up the extraordinary network that connected Aboriginal to their place and to places right across Australia.

### **3.6 The host/guest relationship**

In making this physical crossing through Magpie Jump-up, not only did we make emotional, psychological, spiritual and political crossings, but we moved from a collaborative relationship to one of being guests in a host/guest relationship. Such a relationship has implications not only for us as guests, but for our hosts as well. Philosopher Jacques Derrida explores the relationship between absolute (or unconditional) hospitality and conditional hospitality determined by the Laws and cultural expectations of the host. He describes an extreme

and absolute hospitality given to the stranger who washes up on shore without a name. Such a stranger:

Requires that I open up my home and that I give [access] not only to the foreigner (provided with a family name, with the social status of being a foreigner etc.), but to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other, and that I *give place* to them, that I let them come, that I let them arrive, and take place in the place I offer them, without asking of them either reciprocity (entering into a pact) or even their names. (Derrida & Dufourmantelle, 2000, p. 25).

As we are very aware, such a stranger would normally not be allowed simply to come to Australia, but would have to face complex immigration requirements. As Derrida later explains, such absolute hospitality places the host in a vulnerable position of not knowing whom one is welcoming. Derrida introduces this extreme position to argue that absolute hospitality has to be tempered by conditional hospitality, affirming that the protocols and laws of the host have to be followed. In other words, a universal law of hospitality is subject to the conditional laws of the host (Derrida & Dufourmantelle, 2000, p. 79). Such is the nature of the hospitality that we were afforded. On the one hand we were freely welcomed into country, but on the other the Traditional Owners made us aware of the necessity for Laws and obligations.

Thus such hospitality is intimately related to a place. Casey (2011) argues that place has an edge. This edge is both physical and conditional and involves many factors or dimensions including the difference in history, language and tradition. Casey writes, “All such edges, spatial and bodily and cultural, enact what every edge effects: they bring together and they separate, both at once ...” (p. 44). On the one hand such an edge is broad enough to allow the stranger to enter and to feel welcome, as we did when we descended through Magpie Jump-up into Majaddin. Yet, on the other hand, this edge also reveals difference and restriction, as we encountered protocols such as sensitivity to photographic records.

We crossed through such an edge – indeed several edges – as we travelled through Eddie’s land. In so doing, we moved from a relationship centred on shared action to that of host/guest centred on place and our host’s particular relationship with place. As noted above, such a relationship involves necessity to observe protocols and obligations. Such tension, inherent in the welcome to place, has implication for collaborative relationships, particularly those which involve Indigenous communities. Ian McNiven and Lynette Russell (2005) are critical of past and present colonialist practices which assumed the right to control or undermine the involvement of

Indigenous communities in their research. In such relationships, archaeologists, for instance, have often presumed a kind of absolute welcome or right to enter the Other's land and culture. McNiven and Russell suggest that a host-guest model offers the possibility of further decolonisation of archaeological practice (pp. 236-7). This model explicitly acknowledges a power differential in archaeological research not necessarily acknowledged in the past but certainly in present stakeholder arrangements. As McNiven and Russell argue, the stakeholder model is appealing to many in the archaeology profession because of the need to facilitate management of archaeological sites, including conflict resolution in favour of non-Indigenous stakeholders. However, Indigenous people and communities are thus reduced to mere participants in what is posited as a democratic model. In contrast, to apply a host/guest model is to accept the right of Indigenous communities to control research according to their cultural precepts and understandings. Such research then requires community consent as well as the active community participation in all stages of research. Such a collaborative relationship should be based on the understanding that the archaeologist works as a guest of the host community not because of some prior right as a professional or academic. This is not simply courteous behaviour, but a restructuring of the power relationship which is certainly respectful of the hosts' sensitivities and protocols.

To cross consciously into a host/guest relationship is thus to broaden and extend the meaning and nature of collaboration. A host/guest relationship ceases to be simply work or activity centred. It becomes a complex interplay of many dimensions, including that of a larger understanding of hospitality than simply between two parties. We were not simply working in collaboration; we were living on and being in relationship with the land, and the spirits (*Wandjinas*) of the land which created all living things and thus had first offered hospitality to the host. Eddie explained a little about the extent of his relationship with land:

Yeah, and even the old ancestors have lived up there and passed away. They are right there. And another thing, when we first go up that country I had my mother there with me and that old man pass away but mum, used to go in the place, she sang out, you know, "This my young'ns, they all here, my children, and these all here and you know, like kids, they come here, you know, they want to know this country". So she was introducing us to the country and to the old people. They don't know us you know, but when we go in there, their spirit still there. And mum just call out there. "These our little ones, you know"...like a...every one of us, all the kids come to be in this country you know – a crow calls (Recorded conversation, 13 July 2011).

It is salutary to think that we too were invited into this relationship. We had made a crossing into our host's place and this inevitably affected our mutual relationship. We crossed into a dependent relationship which required new learning and experience. Ross Gobby explained to me that he had begun this journey with the presumptuous thought that he was *taking* the people to their country. In actual fact it was the reverse: "We were completely dependent on their sense of direction and straight navigation, ability to get water, the preparation and how we did the food, the shooting of the cattle and all that sort of stuff supplemented our food" (Recorded conversation, 9 July, 2011). Libby Weeda made a similar comment:

When I was out there it was more than being just humbled. I was completely aware of my absolute ignorance of culture and my lack of understanding of rituals and smoking. I knew next to nothing. Because I knew very little, it put me immediately in their hands because they had to guide me completely really in the appropriate ways to go around things (Recorded conversation, 20 January 2013).

The above comments illustrate our dependence on Eddie and his people. Yet, Derrida raises another issue: this is a three way dependence. Derrida (1999) reminds the reader of the implacable law of hospitality:

The *hôte* who receives (the host), the one who welcomes the invited or received *hôte* (the guest), the welcoming *hôte* who considers himself the owner of the place is in truth the *hôte* received in his own home. He receives the hospitality that he offers *in* his own home; receives it *from* his own home---which, in the end, does not belong to him (p. 41).

Derrida's thinking is thus based on the fact that French word for host (*hôte*) is also the same word for guest (*hôte*). The host is first guest of his own home, which in Eddie's case is the land and the spirits (the *Wandjina*) of the land. Yet, even though we came to Eddie as guests, there is always a danger that we who are guests will try and usurp the guest role and become the hosts. Whitefellas did this in the past and we are prone to repeat this in the present. Derrida identified this tension when he stated that the "one who invites is invited by the one whom he invites" (p. 42).

David Trudinger (2004) explores this paradox in his doctoral thesis. He writes of the relationship of Presbyterian missionaries at Ernabella with the Aboriginal peoples of Central Australia. Trudinger notes that the missionaries who welcomed those who were seeking safety and relief from the colonial invasion were aware that their guests were indeed their hosts. He writes: "But caught in the resonating ironies of the Derridean articulation of the *hôte* did not the

best of the missionaries sense they were in a profound way, being invited by those they had invited, and that their guest was in fact their host” (p. 17).

This strange interplay between the host and the guest is pertinent for Mowanjum’s history. The *Worrorra* and other peoples, who were once host to the missionaries, became their guests. In this dramatic reversal, the people lost contact with their lands as the mission brought them closer, physically and economically, to mainstream Australian society. The missionaries expected not only to be welcomed to a new land, but that the people would adopt the mission way of life and spirituality. In a matter of several decades, those who were the hosts to the missionaries were made the missionaries’ guests and eventually moved off their traditional lands to become strangers in an alien land. The Aboriginal people of the Western Kimberley lost their independence and became dependents of the missionaries, the pastoralists and/or the government.

Canadian academic Rauna Kuokkanen (2008) argues that Aboriginal people treated the newcomers as guests, enabling them not only to survive but to prosper. However, “in many cases, this welcome turned against the hosts” (p. 72). Kuokkanen then notes that: “The etymological genealogy connects hospitality to hostility. The Latin root *hostis* signifies not only the host and hospitality but also hostility and hostage. The *hostis* is thus both a host and an enemy” (p. 73). Such capacity for hostility is therefore present when two cultures meet and interact. I do not suggest that those Presbyterian missionaries intended hostile acts, but they were caught up in a long term movement which led to the people losing their lands and with it their close physical connection to their sacred places. The missionaries sought to teach and to help the people to adapt to a Western culture. But in the process they colluded in the people’s transition from their traditional lands to “exile” at Mowanjum.

Whether the missionary impact on the forebears of Mowanjum was hostile or benign, the result is clear. The people were alienated from their traditional lands as they moved closer to Western “civilisation” and its value system. The missionaries assumed the *Worrorra* people, described as dangerous, would give them absolute (and unconditional) hospitality in Derrida’s terms. The missionary party constructed a house on *Worrorra* lands without the language to ask them for permission to occupy this space or an expectation that this was necessary. Fortunately the *Worrorra* offered hospitality. Within a short time, the people brought “reciprocal gifts, hair girdles, head ornaments, beautifully made spear-heads and even kangaroo meat” (McKenzie, 1969, p. 26). The *Worrorra* did offer hospitality, but considered resistance as well. In time the distrust subsided and many *Worrorra* people enjoyed missionary hospitality. As McKenzie notes, “Kunmunya was an outpost of civilization, a small oasis in the wilderness of the Kimberley” (p.



73ff). The missionaries invited the local people into this outpost by organising sports days, caring for the sick and beginning their education into Western thought and ways.

McKenzie also states that J.R.B. Love, one of the key figures at Kunmunya, thought that the best way to help the *Worrorra* “would be to live with them as equals, living the way they lived, eating their food, hunting with them in all respects”; he then changed his mind to conclude that the best way was to be in a teaching relationship with them (p. 85). This seems an important moment, for it represented the awareness that the missionary’s role was changing from guest to host. Love had been welcomed as a guest into *Worrorra* culture. From what McKenzie states, Love now indicated that he wanted to host the people into the intricacies of Western society. However, Andrew Watts, who is currently researching the life and ministry of J.R.B. Love, reminded me to be careful as I read and quote McKenzie’s history: “She clearly has used many primary sources and oral histories from many individuals who lived and worked through the mission’s history. Unfortunately it is not always clear which source she has used where” (Personal communication, January 2013). Andrew added that these may not be Love’s own words, but could be McKenzie’s assumptions or even come from Love’s wife. Perhaps the early missionaries lived with a paradox as both guest and host. As Andrew stated:

I can understand to a certain extent what Maisie has written. I think Love enjoyed and even thrived on living with the Aboriginal people, working alongside them in day-to-day life, wandering the land with them on hunting trips and for ceremonies, eating their food, knowing about plants, animals and land. I think he even preferred that life to the typical “settled” non-Aboriginal life of the day. However, that is somewhat different to the way she has written that sentence and the context she has given it.

Perhaps, McKenzie as a missionary’s wife would also have had a vested interest in painting the missionaries in a positive light which would have affected her writing.

It was my intention to follow Love’s approach: to be a guest and to learn from the people, living with them on their traditional lands. In so doing, I did not want to usurp their role as host, which occurred when missionaries hosted the people in settlements at Kunmunya and Wotjulum. I was very aware that Mowanjum forebears were compelled to move closer to our Western world view. The move to Mowanjum near Derby brought the people closer to Western economies and the dominant culture. However, the Majaddin trip demonstrates that the people still yearn for their land and culture in the face of a century of acculturation. Perhaps the Mowanjum people demonstrate what community health worker and anthropologist Heather McDonald (2001) found

in the East Kimberley town Halls Creek. In the face of colonisation and the impact of the mission, the people have either held the Christian faith loosely, or embodied the faith into their culture and mindset. Elders such as Eddie incorporated their Christian faith, but also the relevance of the *Wandjina* and spirituality through the land. Was this a form of resistance, or a natural aspect of the teaching policy of missionaries like Love who affirmed the culture as important alongside Christianity?

Eddie and his people have expressed the desire to maintain their culture and relationship with the *Wandjina* by retaining their connection with Majaddin. It is their home. Brian Treanor, building on Casey and Derrida's philosophy of hospitality, writes of the primacy of place. In this respect, hospitality is offered in a home. Treanor (2011) states: "Only an implaced person can be hospitable" (p. 50). A displaced person can be generous, the giver of gifts but not welcome the guest. Yet Derrida argues that a guest enables the host to come home. He writes: "The master of the house is at home, but nonetheless he comes to enter his home through the guest – who comes from the outside. The master thus enters from the inside as *if* he came from the outside. He enters his home thanks to the visitor, by the grace of the visitor" (Derrida, & Dufourmantelle, 2000, p. 125).

Our presence supported Eddie and his family as they came home in a new way. Eddie was clearly at home in Majaddin, particularly as he invited others to share his home. In a strange twist, we who were the visitors enabled Eddie and his family as hosts truly to come into their home. Eddie acknowledged this gift in a later conversation. "I think when people come out, it's a healing process too we go through you know". This healing relationship occurred at many different levels:

Well it does it bring people together. Sometimes you can look back on when Aboriginal people started to work for a ringer, in a stock camp and station, and some *kardia* bloke were real bad treat them like dirt and you know work them. (Eddie did not want to describe the bad treatment; rather, he continued) You see what happened when you guys come in? That's a different thing to the past, in the way it feels. It's all different (the experience of whitefellas). You guys come up there to share our culture. It makes me feel real good! (Recorded conversation, 13 July 2011)

Eddie's words affirmed my contention that there was far more to our relationship than a work focussed understanding of collaboration. This shared return to land offered non-Indigenous participants such as me the opportunity to enter into a relationship with the people that had the potential to heal past injustice.

I talked with two members of the Boab Network after we talked with Eddie about his vision for Majaddin. Lee-Anne Burnett summarised an important moment in our conversation. Eddie had shared what our presence meant to him. She said: “To think that by being there, you might have kindled the spark that allowed him to think that his vision might become reality. That’s what it has done. I am sure that he always had the dream. But suddenly he began to think that it might be do-able” (Recorded conversation, Lee-Anne Burnett and Ross Gobby, October 2012).

Eddie came to see his vision for the return to Majaddin in a new and more complete way because of our collaboration. His vision for Majaddin broadened to include others outside of his family group. It is a place where he could share with others from Mowanjum and beyond. It meant a great deal to him for the Mowanjum people and his non-Indigenous friends to join him in this important visit. He said: “It was a real something to see other people look at my country...The stories told by our old people could live and non-Indigenous people and even our young ones too, to understand that you know” (Recorded conversation, 13 July 2011). Eddie has a vision of Majaddin being a special place not only for the Mowanjum community, but for non-Indigenous people as well. Of course, non-Indigenous people would not be privy to all the cultural knowledge that would be passed on to younger *Ngarinyin* people. This welcome speaks of the continuation of Eddie’s relationship with his land. Eddie has truly come home to his place in the act of being the host. In being guests of the *Ngarinyin* people we were reversing a trend that had occurred for most of the twentieth century with white men seeking to be host to a dependent Aboriginal community, whether by establishing communities such as Mowanjum, on the pastoral stations or in government programs.

Thus to make the crossing at Magpie Jump-up we crossed from a divisive and detached way of relating to the land to that of engagement and emplacement. However, it is also a paradoxical crossing, for it brought me into a deeper realisation of what it meant to be a stranger to this land, and born of those who came from afar. Yet also, in this crossing, I was welcomed as a friend and enabled to share the extraordinary privilege of being with the traditional owners and their families as they related to their spiritual and cultural heritage.

### **3.7 Dissonance in the garden**

We continued to experience what it meant to cross into another culture and way of being as we lived on the land with the traditional owners. We worked together, spent time sharing food and conversation and enjoyed the opportunity to be in community. In this respect we felt in familiar

territory, yet we also felt the dissonance of experiencing ways of living and being that were remote from our own experiences and cultural understandings.

Some of our party helped to install plumbing equipment and therefore made practical contributions to Eddie's vision for Majaddin. In this respect, we were well within our comfort zone. However, some of us also took part in two hunting expeditions. This experience was yet another crossing: this time into a place of dissonance and discomfort.

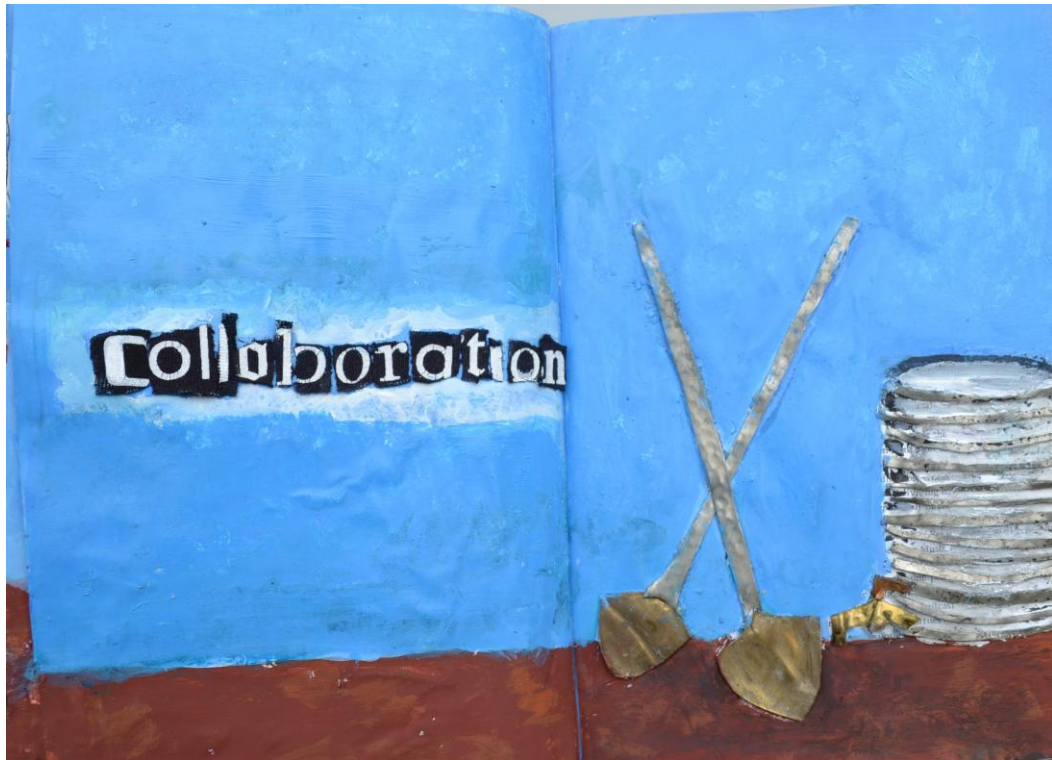


Figure 23: Collaboration as working together

As guests we were introduced to what it meant to live with and on the land. This meant that we confronted our Western values and understandings on many different levels. Carol Birrell writes of how non-Indigenous people might enter deeply into Indigenous ways of seeing and being on country. She seeks to be guided by Aboriginal people and their culture as she asks the question of how to enter deeply into place. But as Birrell (2006) notes, her approach risks “idealizing or romanticizing the Aboriginal ‘other’, particularly when speaking of traditional Aboriginal cultures” (p. 28). I agree with her, and certainly our engagement with the people and their land challenged this romantic ideal. In the following account, I describe the exhilaration of the chase leading to the kill and cutting up the beef:

Later in the afternoon, Matt and I joined Donny to go hunting. This meant driving across the land, looking for a young juicy bullock. I got caught up in the hunt, oblivious to the dangers of the drive. I filmed an intensive sequence of the hunt, from the first sighting, the shots, and the involvement of the people in cutting the cow up. The children and youth watch but then certain young boys are given the responsibility to cut up the other side of the cow (Personal Journal, October 2010).



Figure 24: The hunt

Gordon Barunga also commented on the hunt (Recorded conversation, 11 July 2011). For him it was good to do things together. He stated, “I like to see when we get together chasing that thing you know. I feel happy”. I replied that it was really doing things together. He was interested that we were taking photos of cutting up the first cow. Then he asked, “Did you have a good feed all the meat?” I replied that I had a bit, but I did not have a lot of meat. The next hunt was far more traumatic. The shooters failed to ground the cow with their first shots and we spent a good half hour chasing it across the open ground. Eventually, the cow was brought to ground and killed. I spoke with Gordon about the second kill, and he reminded me that I had left the car and wanted to drag the cow to the ground so that others could kill it. This was a silly thing to do but arose from my compassion for the cow. I replied, “and you were shouting after me”. Gordon added, “You don’t want to do that”. We both laughed. It was more serious for Keith Bakker, one

of our Boab Network participants. He shared his memory of the experience as one of the most traumatic he had ever witnessed. The first cow had been shot cleanly, but the people had difficulty killing the second. A .22 rifle seemed inadequate to make a clean kill (Recorded conversation, 3 July 2011).

I witnessed the intersection of two cultures in these hunts. Helmut Petri (2011) writes of his expedition in the late 1930s, recording the life and culture of the *Ungarinyin*, who lived in the Western Kimberley. He notes that the kangaroo hunt featured as the central event in their economic and daily community life (p. 9). He visited the region at a time when the traditional hunting weapons were undergoing change with spears made of tips of sheet iron or bottle glass. Philip Jones (2007) also highlights such changes and the intersection of two cultures recorded in an object. Museum objects such as an axe “fashioned from the metal frame of a camel saddle abandoned by perishing explorers in the Great Sandy Desert” reveal fascinating stories of this intersection (p. 6). Donny and others had used modern equipment, suggesting that their culture had been supplanted. Although they used guns, the way in which the meat was cut and the involvement of Elders teaching young men how to deal with the meat suggest older practices. Indeed, the hunt is as an expression of the hunter tradition which left Boab members shaken because it offended our modern sensibility.

It was difficult to deal with a different set of cultural norms and values from our own. It also challenged that innate feeling of wanting to control our experience, if not the way the camp operated. A recurrent theme concerning the interaction of the Boab Network with the Mowanjum people in this initial journey to Majaddin was our attempts to bring order in what we perceived as chaos. Questions which we considered included: to what extent should we take responsibility for food preparation, ordering the supplies and preserving what we believed was an acceptable hygiene level? Should we live as the Mowanjum people live on land, or meet some of our own expectations regarding these issues?

On the first morning at Majaddin I decided to approach cooking breakfast with some chaos. That was until two Aboriginal girls came to my aid and took charge of the eggs. I noted in my journal that I enjoy chaos; it seems to bring out the best in people, rather than having a strictly disciplined approach which puts people on edge. Then Keith came to me and anxiously spoke of the lack of showers and the difficulty of camping. I had been aware that he was under stress during this journey. I also noted that non-Indigenous people such as Keith require supports such as showers and toilets. Our Aboriginal friends were content to swim for cleansing and to use the

bush for the toilet. Meals usually involved cooking on the fire, which was a problem because food became full of dirt. Shared utensils were the norm and rarely washed.

Keith also had trouble eating the bush food because he had been traumatised by the kill that had gone seriously wrong. He was now being discerning in what he would or would not eat. For example, he shared that he would not have any of the cattle, having participated in this kill. Keith added that he had trouble with other food: “I didn’t go for any of the brim soup either that was a bit rough for me, but they don’t use it as soup; they just put it in a bit of foil paper and just peel the skin off and tear bits of meat off them”. Yet surprisingly Keith summed up his experience with the words: “and so for me the whole thing was a terrific learning” (Recorded conversation, 3 July 2011). I wonder if the word terrific has resonance of terrible and terrifying!

Ross Gobby told me that the camp began with a sense of control, and then deteriorated as the conditions became more “tribal” (Recorded conversation, 9 July 2011). I appreciated Ross’s honesty but the word “tribal” may suggest a reversion to a kind of primitive way of being inferior to Western civilisation and etiquette. What he encountered is the radical difference between that etiquette exhibited in an *up-country* journey by Aboriginal people and that experienced in life in Mowanjumb or in our own cities. There was less concern for hygiene and fastidious cleanliness, and the presentation of food. Ross said that he could cope when meat was cooked and shared after the people killed a couple of cows. It was different when we camped at Manning Gorge. Donny and some of the young men killed a few turkeys and shared them with the community. As Ross explained:

We weren’t set up; we just camped in the dust underneath some trees. And cooked blackfella way. And Libby and I said, “I can’t cope with this. You know this is too tribal”. This is a step too far, and Libby and I left the camp and went back around the back of our vehicle and found some food some tinned ham and some other stuff which we felt comfortable with and we sat on a rock out of the sight of the rest of the group and had a meal - like a salad and spam meal which we were comfortable with as being a Western sort of meal on clean plates out of the dust, like a picnic (Recorded conversation, 9 July 2011).

Together we clarified an important issue, yet to be fully resolved. What boundaries need to exist between Indigenous and non-Indigenous ways of being in the bush? We, who are non-Indigenous, face a difficult choice. We could try to live as Aboriginal people *up-country* or acknowledge that this is impossible, undesirable and we can live *up-country* in our own ways. We



tried to prepare food in a central location, but this seemed counter to the people wanting to have their separate camp fires. This led to the question: would we bother in future to prepare communal meals? It seemed more appropriate to adapt our approach to what we experienced as Aboriginal groups cooking food in their own family groups. These questions brought us back to more fundamental questions: what does it mean to be a guest in Aboriginal lands and what is the nature of this hospitality?

### 3.8 Crossing to the sacred place

We were invited to visit the Majaddin caves while participating in traditional protocols, which meant being smoked and taking part in a brief ceremony in which one of the Elders announced our presence to the *Wandjina*. This event reinforced my understanding that we were not only guests of the *Ngarinyin* community but of the land and the spirits of the land.

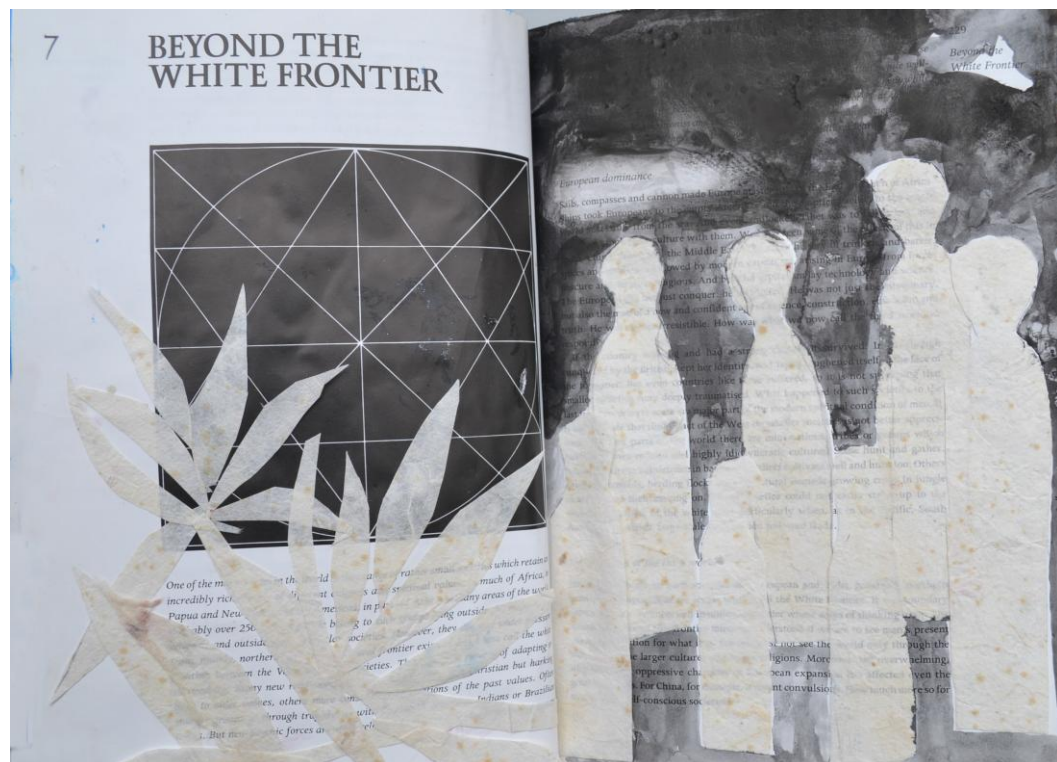


Figure 25: Beyond the white frontier

We had the opportunity for new learning about what it meant to be with Aboriginal people in a completely different relationship. If the past is a guide, non-Indigenous people consciously or unconsciously have sought to control Aboriginal people in the assumption of the dominance of Western cultural superiority and thought. Out bush, at Majaddin, we were challenged to learn what it meant to be in relationship with land, people and their spirituality. This would affect our



understanding of what it meant to collaborate with Aboriginal people and communities. The caves are sacred places, so that I was invited into communion with the people and the creation Spirits of the land was as profound as any spiritual experience in my own religious tradition.

Eddie Bear hosted this high point of our visit. A key *Ngarinyin* Elder accompanied him, speaking in language to the *Wandjinas* and telling stories in language. Again we faced an edge, a threshold which required certain procedures in order that we might have the right of crossing. Such procedures arose from the sacred/spiritual memory of our hosts and defined our relationship with this place as much as the landscape and our bodies. Hospitality exists in the tension between **unconditional hospitality** – the freedom implied through being welcomed as guests to this place – but also of **conditional hospitality** – the necessity to undergo a process of welcome adhering to prearranged protocols of behaviour.<sup>2</sup> Such protocols would not only apply to our experience of Majaddin, but to how we shared this experience with the wider public.

We were very conscious of being guests who had to be led into the proper relationship with these ancient sites. By following the instructions and teaching we affirmed their right to be hosts as they related to their country and developed a vision for the future. This contrasts with many tourists and other visitors who ignore or dismiss the importance of the Traditional Owner's host role. We would not collect knowledge to bring back into a Western academic or communal environment. We would avoid removing stories or images from their connection with land, as is often done in the name of research. In this respect we were told not to take photos of these places. I therefore deleted any images that the children might have taken on the cameras that we had provided. I was allowed to take sound recordings as an important record for the community, but I was reminded to treat these recordings sensitively and not to use them in any video that I might produce. Being a guest is radically different from wandering unannounced into a sacred place. It is essential to observe the protocols which in this case were concerns about recording the sacred place and images. I had been careful to gain permission to use my recorder, but in a later conversation with an *Ngarinyin* Elder I was warned not to play this to the wrong people. Not everyone has permission to hear traditional language and particular stories, and this may be an affront if shared with the wrong person. I decided not to include this sound track in the video that I ultimately made for the community.

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<sup>2</sup> Perhaps hospitality can never be unconditional as there will always be accompanying protocols (interpreted as "conditions") regardless of the culture. It is just that sometimes we do not know them and are not told what they are.

Despite our best efforts to adhere to the protocols, we did breach an important cultural norm. We had been told that we would travel to the caves before breakfast, but waited for hours. Indeed, we thought that it would not happen, and went through many discussions and emotions. Finally, our hosts led us toward the caves, travelling in convoy. I later realised that I and several others behaved like whitefellas by becoming impatient. I learnt later that an Elder had been upset that she and others were pushed to go before they were ready. In speaking with Ross later, he remembered his impatience and an Elder telling him later that this was inappropriate. Ross noted:

We were waiting 'til the old people were ready to go. We were going to a sacred site. We weren't going to any old place. We were going to a sacred site. You can't go to a sacred site like that unless the old people are ready to go. Now what constitutes "being ready" I have no idea, you see, because I'm *kardia*. But something constitutes being ready. And when they're ready, they're ready and off we go. But I pushed the envelope. I went before I should have. It was like shouting loudly in church or something like that in our culture. It is completely inappropriate behaviour. No one said anything overtly to me. No one got off their bike and balled me out or anything like that. But very subtly the word was got to me through third persons. That "listen mate, you were out of line then...". And I linked that to the fact that we were completely their guests. And here I was, a guest in their country, taking the lead and acting like a bull at a gate, and I am not proud of that. And it has taught me humility. That and the observation of being in the presence of great antiquity, a culture of antiquity when it is so current and all these sort of issues. It just shows (Recorded conversation, 9 July 2011).

As it turned out, this was a pivotal moment in our relationship with the people, because it revealed our unconscious tendencies to act to control a situation even when we were clearly in the guest role. As we reflected on this incident, it became clear that we were not merely dealing with polite issues of etiquette; it was a basic ethical dilemma. Derrida (1999) writes that "hospitality is not some region of ethics ... it is the whole and the principle of ethics" (p. 50). To engage in a host/guest relationship is to undertake to live by the value system of our hosts. McNiven and Russell (2005) explore this understanding as they posit that archaeologists should adopt a host/guest understanding of their collaborations rather than regard Aboriginal people as mere stakeholders around traditional sites (p. 179). To adopt this approach therefore is to change one's behaviour sometimes in what appear to be simple ways. We wait on our hosts for permission and for guidance when in their lands rather than assuming that we as non-Indigenous peoples have

automatic rights. We in the Boab Network have since adopted this into our mission statement and accompanying values (see chapter 7).

Our hosts welcomed us and in return we tried to observe their protocols. However, the host/guest relationship is two way. The host also has a responsibility for our care and education. Treanor (2011) argues that it is not enough for the host simply to enable the guest to pass through the threshold. True hospitality implies that the host enables the guest to feel at home in this foreign place: “to help the other implace herself, even in a temporary or ‘as-if’ manner, to help the other *feel (as-if) at home*” (p. 62). As the following narrative and conversations illustrate, the Mowanjum people not only welcomed and invited us past the threshold, but they also cared for us and mediated the experience. Our hosts offered us support as we endeavoured to relate to this strange experience, completely alien to our cultural heritage and understanding.

The caves were old and had not been *freshened*, meaning repainted, for a long time. I felt extremely emotional, particularly with the thought that this was Eddie’s family story. The *Wandjinas* are like members of the family – the grandfathers, fathers and brothers – but are talking of long lost generations. Unlike Western Christianity, the spirit beings are firmly anchored in the land. They are intimately connected to the person, his family and the creatures of the land. It is a holistic relationship. The images on the cave include a gallery of *Wandjinas*. We were made aware of the profound links across the generations, as the *Wandjinas* recorded on the cave were both spirit beings but also the generations who had lived before in the land. We were guests in the family home which extended over thousands of years, and our hosts were with us. One of the Elders sang songs in traditional language and told stories about the *Wandjinas*. To say I was profoundly moved is an understatement. Such a place offered me new understanding of my spirituality, challenging my Western God-centred upbringing.

Later in the morning we went to the *Wadoyi* caves. These caves, too, had images of *Wandjinas*, bush plants and animals. Then Eddie took us to a camp site high above the flat. It was a cave in the midst of the sandstone, with signs of ancient life. The walls were pockmarked with the chips of the spear heads. We were allowed to film this site, which allowed me a feeling of ease. Eddie explained that the people could watch out for any intruders into the valley below and, depending on who they were, could slip away unnoticed. Our hosts then took us to the place where the action of the women averted a major conflict. Eddie invited us to search for spear heads, but we found none.

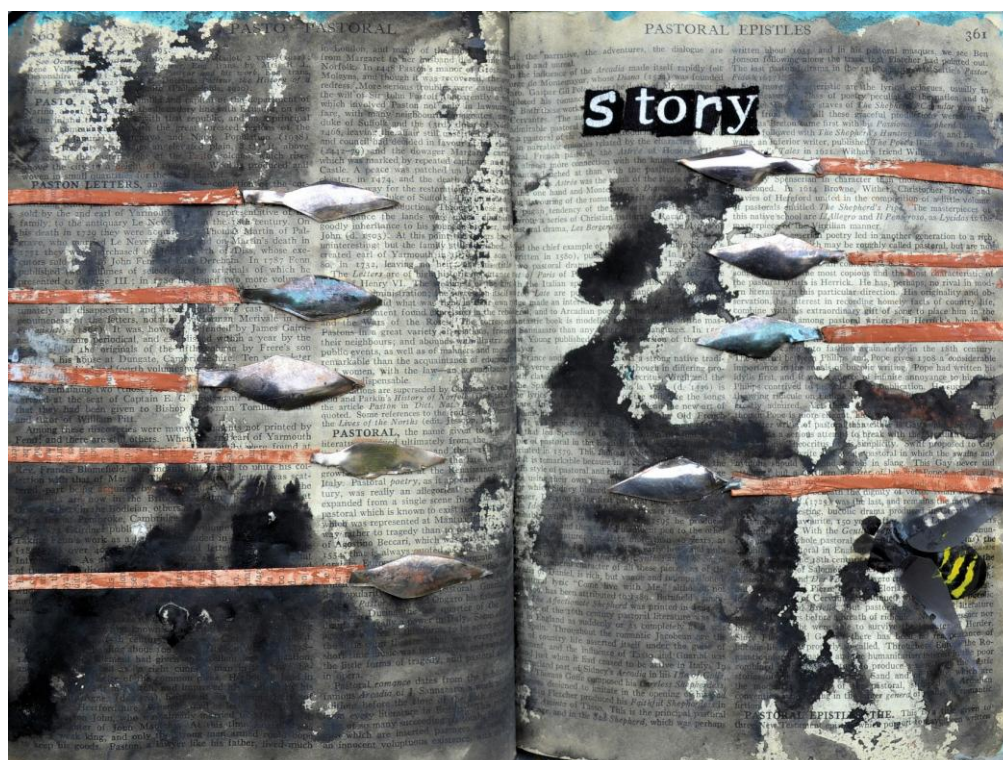


Figure 26: Story

The Mowanjium children, like us, were affected by the visit to the caves. Indeed, it was very important that the children were with us. It was a unique opportunity for them to experience their culture and to learn from their Elders on site. Peter Croll remembered walking up to the site with the children. He said, “The kids were there and how quiet and solemn it was. How sort of all very well behaved they were. They were all sitting on the edge of the rocks looking up at the *Wandjinas*”. I agreed with him. Peter added, “You know, it is down to the serious business of culture”. I replied, “So it does make a difference to them to hear stories and see the caves”. Peter said, “Yes!” (Recorded conversation, 9 July 2011).

### 3.9 The visit to the caves (and other cultural matters) from Eddie Bear’s perspective

I later discussed the visit to the Majaddin caves with Eddie Bear. He recounted that we stopped at a particular tree and gathered its branches for the smoking. He and his wife Edna explained the reason for this particular tree, making it clear that they too came as guests to the one who is the host, the *Wandjina*. Furthermore, they have integrated their Christian understandings of God with traditional beliefs. Both are important in their lives. I had also asked Eddie to explain the meaning of the smoking. Both Eddie and his wife Edna answered my question:

Well it (someone calls out- who you looking for, what you come for....pause then chuckle) that's that tree crackle. We make noise of that tree, that leaf. It's like he's speaking that leaf; he is talking. (Edna adds: It is just like somebody coming he crackle) When you hear the sound of the crackle, you know they're coming when you hear footsteps. Footsteps coming, it tells the *Wandjina* we're coming (Recorded conversation, 13 July 2011).

When I said to Eddie that I was intrigued by the noise, he gave the following explanation, with the help of Edna, his wife, who added extra details:

Eddie: Yeah it make that noise. That tree is like spirit.

Edna: Only tree that crackles like that. They know that tree.

Eddie: The *Wandjina* they hear as we come.

Edna: It drives away spirits. They use the leaves to smoke them when somebody dies.

Eddie: We always get that tree. They use them up that end all the time, but now they use a different tree.

Edna: A different tree for a different place.

Eddie: Yeah different place!

I wanted to hear how Eddie would explain the smoking. I recounted how we went through the smoke and asked him what its purpose was. Eddie replied that it was like a cleansing. I suggested that this was like the prayer of confession, where we leave things behind in the speaking and receiving healing and forgiveness.

I was reminded of the experience with the caves and the smoking when *Ngarinyin* singer Matthew Martin presented a talk in Melbourne accompanied by ethnomusicologist Sally Treloyn. He had commented on what it meant to take visitors to the caves in this talk. He shared:

When you take a big mob of people from here, visitors, you take them to the cave you want to show them the *Wandjina*. Before you enter the cave you do the ceremony smoke. People have to walk through the smoke. You talk in your language. You have a lot of visitors, you are taking your mate there. You have a lot of visitors, you talk

language you tell them [the *Wandjina*] to welcome you to come in that make sure that they are kept healthy (Martin & Treloyn, 2012).

We had experienced the smoking and the calling out in language. However, Matt added a very important statement that illustrates the healing and protective nature of the experience.

That *Wandjina* you getting sick or getting lost somewhere in the bush, most of the *Wandjina* in the bush, you might walk off somewhere. But the Spirit will take you back where your camping area is. It sort of drag you back there. After the smoke when all the people take you there they talk to the spirit. You walk through the smoke and you go and see this painting. You have a look at it you will be happy and have a good night's sleep, run around in the morning.

### **3.10 Beyond Resonance: meeting the Other who refuses to be known**

I asked Ross what were the powerful moments in his visit to the caves. He replied that it was the smoking ceremony because it was “a window into a spiritual world that I now believe is there, which I had no knowledge of before” (Recorded conversation, 9 July 2011). For Ross the visit to the caves was more than a cultural experience; it was a spiritual experience of the highest order. He referred to the age of the caves and as he recounted, “The ochre that they put on to refresh the eyes of the *Wandjinas* is now caked in layers that's built up twenty or thirty millimetres in some cases”. This visit had affirmed that a spirituality that is thousands of years old is being maintained in the experience of contemporary people. As Ross stated: “It is one thing to talk about the caves in Masala [in India], whatever it is in France [Chauvet] and the Neanderthal people but that's of a people who have long since gone and we have no connection with them”.

Peter Croll who had organised many *up-country* trips, noted that “for any Europeans to go on a trip like that it is a learning experience”. Peter also said that he has been able to do things with the Mowanjam people that “any other European will not be able to do in their lives” (Recorded conversation, 9 July 2011). Peter reminded me that this place was not contaminated with tourism as are many overseas sacred sites. Ian Obern had a similar reaction, enjoying the experience of the caves and noted how generous Eddie was in showing us the sites. He elaborated on the importance of having Eddie as traditional owner with us:

Well I mean I come across quite a few art sites on my walking and my visits to the country. I find that even though you can sit there and look at the paintings and really admire them and the work that goes into them, it is important to have Elders of that

country, that area. I'm not a spiritual person but I find that it just means more to be there and sharing with Eddie (Recorded conversation, 13 July 2011).

Keith Bakker described this special experience of the caves which made him think of his own faith. He outlined that moment when we gathered the branches of the special tree with Eddie and Matthew and then made a fire for the smoking ceremony. He noted that it made him think of Christian rituals such as baptism. In Keith's words: "for me it was a rebirth, of understanding the spirituality of these people that I have had, but far more enriching than my own Christian spirituality" (Recorded conversation, 3 July 2011).

Keith's description resonates with the account of missionary Love (1936), who had the opportunity to view a *Worrorra* initiation rite. Love linked it to the rites of his church such as Baptism and the sacred meal of Communion. "When our Lord instituted the Last Supper he gave us no new observance, but took an age old rite, sublimated it and gave it a new content" (p. 219). Love concluded that the gulf between "the most highly civilized man and the most savage is far less than many a casual thinker believes" (p. 220). This observation written almost eighty years ago is obviously predicated on the view that Western culture was superior – a view that is reflected in his language. For Love and Keith Bakker there was a resonance between the sacred places and rites of Aboriginal people and their spiritual roots. As much as Love and others have tried to interpret these images and sites within a Christian framework, it is best to leave them as incomprehensible, carrying meanings that are inaccessible to a Western educated and enculturated person. We might see resonance in the experience, but this Other (such as the *Wandjina*), this Stranger, remains incomprehensible for non-Indigenous people.

I am very conscious of having encountered the Other, that alien experience that does not fit with my cultural background or experience. Richard Kearney and Kascha Semonovitch (2011) write of that "sacred Stranger (that) makes its presence known and yet withdraws from attempts at complete comprehension" (p. 32). This statement sums up my experience of what it meant to encounter the sacred caves. I find a strange tension between seeking to find resonance with my own sense of spirit and spirituality and acknowledging what Kearney and Semonovitch call "sacred strangeness". I see the *Wandjina* painted on the cave wall, yet who or what awaits at the threshold of my experience? And where do I place the *Wandjina* in my philosophical and spiritual understanding? According to Kearney and Semonovitch, the Stranger occupies that liminal space between the nameless and the named, the Other and the Foreigner:

The Stranger may be radically Other at one point in a relationship and identifiably Foreign in another. As Other, it is so unexpected and transcendent that it eludes our knowledge. It becomes radically unseeable and unforeseeable. At this point, masks slip, the Foreigner loses face, absents itself without leave, absolves itself from habitation and name; it ceases to be recognizably foreign and becomes totally alien (pp. 5-6).

This sums up my experience of the *Wandjina*. The *Wandjina* as foreigner is identified through the many books that I have read and my experience with the Mowanjum community. It is foreign but still recognisable. Yet, in this very moment of recognition, the *Wandjina* ceases to be familiar and becomes Other. It refuses to be placed in a Western thought form or integrated into my experience. It remains aloof and incomprehensible. Libby, sharing a little of her experience, struggled to put this in words:

When I went into the cave I knew that I couldn't see what they saw. And I felt a strong [presence], and it is what I felt when we were at Grasshopper Dreaming. I can't articulate what it was, but I felt a presence, a sort of pull in the place. I felt that there was something there but I couldn't articulate it and I couldn't really see (Recorded conversation, 20 January 2013 ).

When Ross and I reflected on our experience of the caves, and in particular the smoking, Ross spoke of the Christian cleansing rituals which involve forgiveness and the need to cleanse us from our imperfect pasts. Is this similar? He argued:

As we understood, the smoking is a cleansing process (that's what Eddie said) and it's a cleansing of the spirits that you carry with you. We would defile the site if we were not so cleansed ...Which is the implication, you can't just walk across there not having been smoked into it. Unannounced, those spirits won't be happy. Not only that, they won't open up to you. And I am quite sure as a whitefellow that you can drive up in your four wheel drive without being accompanied by those people, see that site, not be smoked and simply walk across there and look at them (Recorded conversation, 9 July 2011).

Ross continued to discuss the presence of the spirits in the caves. Without referring to the Other or the Stranger, he expressed that confusion that many of us felt. We experienced the caves, their artwork and the songs and stories which were shared. These were foreign but recognisable. Then there was something Other, something foreign which sought to be acknowledged yet eluded our



capacity to describe or contain it. Ross stated that if you walk into the caves with an open heart and mind then they might reveal themselves to you. He adds, “I’m humbled because I know I can’t see them. And that’s not because they’re not there, it’s because I am simply too juvenile, too naïve, too unwise”. I wonder if Ross is judging himself too harshly and that this is evidence of a completely different way of seeing and being having long since been lost in Western consciousness.

### **3.11 Spirit land**

We continued to experience this Other when we visited another significant site the next day. We climbed to the top of the nearby escarpment with Matt Martin as our guide. It was our intention to go quickly and with few people, but the idea grew and we soon had a number of cars on the move. There was a large hole in the escarpment. The image story of this hole had been painted onto the cave which we had visited the day before. The story goes that a falcon had chased a grasshopper, which made this enormous hole in the rock to escape.

It was a tough climb to the top, and risky at points. To our surprise we saw a bundle of bones, covered in red ochre and placed on a very high ledge. It was a gravesite. Ross recounted climbing through the hole and the realisation that there were human remains on a ledge above. He stated:

When we were about half way up, all of a sudden our eyes were drawn and we said, “what is that?” We saw something on a ledge, high above us about thirty or forty meters above us. We looked at that and we thought that’s, it’s an extra, it wasn’t natural, it wasn’t part of the normal nature. And it wasn’t human it was something. And we stood there and we looked at it for a long time. We couldn’t make out what it was. But anyway because we were separated from the rest of the group, anyway we kept climbing. When we came back we didn’t know anything about that area being a burial ground. When we came back that came out, I think it was probably the next day even. I started to realise that what we had actually seen was the burial site high on the ridge. Now that burial site had magnetism and a spiritual character of its own. That is something in the landscape, that even being ignorant the way we were, of what it was and so on, it took your attention (Recorded conversation, 9 July 2011).

Elders later thought that we should be smoked to avoid contamination with the spirit of the dead “following us home”. At least no one seemed to show any negative effects of the encounter.

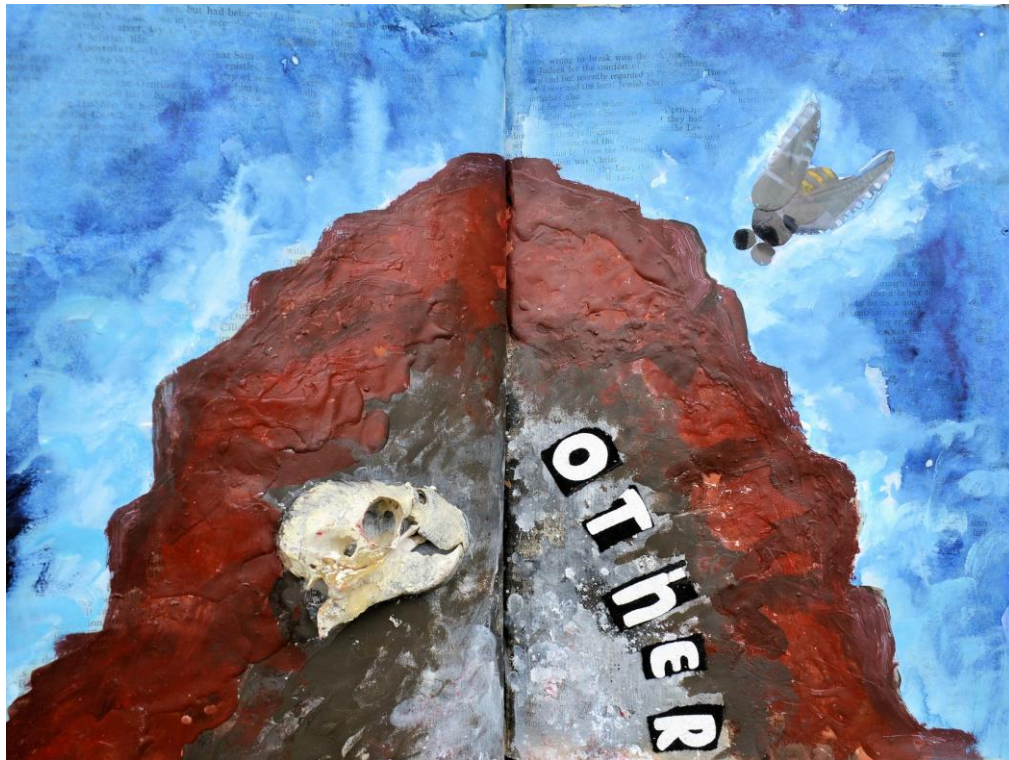


Figure 27: Other

Libby was also with us on this journey. She shared the importance of viewing the landscape from the vantage point high above the Majaddin grasslands. She noted that although she was just having a glimpse of the land, and it was nothing that the Majaddin people would feel, it gave her a sense of love for and connection with the land. She shared, “I was very moved, seeing that it was so pristine and enormous” (Recorded conversation, 20 January 2013).

As I reflected on the visit to the caves and the experience of Grasshopper Dreaming, I became conscious of the Other dimension of land. We were engaging in an Australian spirituality which radically challenged Western materialistic thinking, that saw the land in detached if not mechanistic terms. We had experienced the land as a spiritual landscape where the people, the creatures and the ancient spirits of the land were in close relationship. Such an experience also challenges the nature and meaning of collaboration, for we were guests of the *Ngarinyin* people and they had invited us into the essence of their spirituality and relationship with the land.

### 3.12 Dreams and dreaming

One of the major difficulties of a journey of this magnitude is to integrate it into one’s future life. I undertook a three-way explorative process of reflection on my experience including my dreams, later conversations with participants and wider reading. I had a dream on the way

back from Majaddin which illustrates the beginning of such an integration. I wrote the following in my journal:

*I was writing an order for a service: the issue between letting it emerge and arranging an order of worship. I saw a tower and the wall which reminded me of Richmond Uniting Church (Personal journal, October 2010).*

It is difficult to find order and meaning in a profound journey such as this crossing to Majaddin. I engaged in a radically different way of being and relating to community and the land than is normally the case for non-Indigenous Australians. As I reflected on this dream, I noted that I had wanted to arrange my research in advance. This is like that which I dutifully prepared every Sunday in the parish. Indeed, I faced the prospect of writing a proposal to receive the approval of the ACU Human Research Ethics Committee. They wanted to know my methodology in advance. I was experiencing a different way of being, though; my research was emerging with the people. The order could not be fully described in advance. The tower and the wall reminded me of the Boab tree that I slept beside. I was being deeply impacted by the Kimberley landscape. I noted in my diary: "My tower is not an academic tower but a natural tower which emerges from the landscape. The Richmond Church wallpaper reminds me of the old church. I must not impose old values on the situation but be prepared to allow new things to emerge" (Personal Journal, October, 2010). In the night before I had allowed my control self to dominate. I had lost my swag and I naturally panicked. I had reverted to old habits. I need not have worried because the community took care of me. I was given what I needed for a comfortable night's sleep.

I was learning to be with the people: to be open to the moment. For example, I heard and recorded this spontaneous story telling just when we were leaving Mt Barnett. Gordon heard the cries of the ravens (large black crows) fossicking through the camp site. He immediately shared the following story:

He told me a story about the raven and the ark. I will now hear that story within me whenever I come across a raven. When the flood reached its conclusion Noah sent a raven out to find dry land. The raven scavenged across the waters eating all the dead carrion. He never returned to the ark, so that Noah then had to send the dove to find land. Instead, the raven searched and searched, all the time crying out ark, ark (Personal journal, October, 2010).

I taped the story and then went out to film the raven as he scavenged for food and cried out his mournful cry.

Ironically, this story of the raven became a metaphor for my own return after this trip. I am like the raven, searching for land after being deluged, almost overwhelmed by the depth of this encounter with land and the people's spirituality. I would later go on other journeys and continue to be adrift on a foreign sea. Like the raven, I would seek the security of dry land, a way to integrate this experience into my consciousness and present it to others.

### **3.13 Making sense of the unknowable**

I had experienced an encounter with a culture that was well outside of my own cultural background and understanding. I thus asked the question: "What then does it mean to be with Aboriginal people as they visit their traditional lands and caves?" One answer is that the Boab Network and I were engaged in a ritualised visit that invited us to leave our normal consciousness behind and enter an in-between state, which exists between two ontological understandings. These different epistemologies are that of being in relationship to the earth, the cosmos and the people versus our individualistic way of functioning separate from the land and the cosmos and often from each other. In that process, we were invited into a relationship which broke down the normal sense of them and us, Indigenous and non-Indigenous.

This experience affected my approach to and understanding of spirituality and what it means to be a religious person on Australian soil. We were guests in the ritual space of those who remain Other to us, despite the fact that this experience broke down barriers and we were allowed to be fully present in this communal experience. Eddie Bear's family gains their significance from this country, while also adding to the landscape's significance by the memory and the ritual. Thus songs were sung in the caves, passed on from previous generations, where the very act of singing adds life and meaning to the caves. In a real sense the mysterious and Other nature of the place is sung into reality in the here and now.

There is a huge distinction between visiting such caves as a tourist without the presence of the traditional owners and our visit to the Majaddin caves with Eddie and his relations as hosts. We are not merely invited to view a form of art, as ancient and powerful as these forms are, but we were invited to take part in the ritual landscape of the people which extends beyond the material into a shared consciousness, past and present. This shared consciousness is indivisibly connected to and arises from the place.

When I spoke with Libby about what it meant to return to her "normal" life, she spoke about the difficulty of relating with her friends in the same way. She noted:

Once you have been on a trip up country. You feel like you have been afforded a deeper experience of reality, which sounds silly because everything is real. But you have been given a much deeper experience of reality. ... And coming back listening to conversations that are so different, coming to school and talking about TV that people have watched before... (Recorded conversation, 20 January 2013).

I responded by saying that I too deal with this issue. I would experience the Kimberley land and its traditional owners and this would have enormous implications for my understanding of what is important in my own life and culture.

This journey involved a profound encounter with the people of the land and their traditional culture. I learnt the importance of hospitality and of being a guest in a host/guest relationship. I learnt the importance of traditional lands for the *Ngarinyin* people. I began learning about being and relating, a kind of apprenticeship to Eddie as he related to his land. Returning home brings other issues to the fore. I (and others in the Boab Network) reflected on what the trip might mean for life in Mowanjum and for ongoing collaboration and community development. I also explored the meaning of collaboration in the light of the special nature of an *up-country* journey where Aboriginal people are our hosts. We found that the meaning of collaboration is affected by being *up-country*. We were taught how to relate to the land, and to the people, with their unique culture and spirituality. This meaning challenges a limited definition of collaboration centred on a particular task or outcome. The other more difficult question to determine is how such collaboration could lead to a better future. How then might the experience of this *up-country* journey make any difference to the challenges faced by the Mowanjum community and the Boab Network's involvement in that community? I took this question with me on further journeys with the Mowanjum people and the Boab Network.

## Chapter 4:

### Allies in the fight for land rights



Figure 28: Black cocky missing

## 4.1 A personal story

I have walked alongside the Mowanjum people in many ways, both before and during this research. In our shared journeys I learnt what it meant to relate to the people as they struggled to return to their land and as they struggled for land rights. I began my research with the question of collaboration, but in my journey to Majaddin (chapter 3) I found the notion of collaboration limited by being a guest on Aboriginal land. In this next journey to Yalun (Cone Bay), I felt more an ally than simply a researcher or companion collaborating with the people. My experience at Yalun gave me an opportunity to learn about the Mowanjum people's long struggle for land rights at close hand, and undergirded what it might mean to be an ally.

I begin this chapter with the story of my journey to join with the *Worrorra* people at the Wanjin Wunggurr Native Title Determination at Yalun on the Kimberley Coast in May 2011. It is tempting to see native title as the final culmination of a land rights struggle. This is not the case because native title has significant limitations for the *Worrorra* Elders with whom I consulted. Taking part in the determination at Yalun enabled me to appreciate the complexity of their struggle in a unique way and thus relate to the people as they continue to seek land rights. I therefore sought to investigate the longer story of the Mowanjum people's fight for land rights in order to appreciate the significant challenges they have had to overcome in their quest to return to their traditional lands. The land rights struggle has been a shared journey, given the fact that many non-Indigenous people, including church workers, assisted the Mowanjum people as they sought to return to and regain their lands. The struggle is far from complete and assistance continues to be required from non-Indigenous allies such as the Boab Network. In this chapter I primarily focus on the history of this shared journey leading to the determination at Yalun. I explore this history from the perspective of several Mowanjum people and also those who journeyed with the people in their church roles. Comprehending this long history of struggle and its resonance for the Mowanjum people became vital to understand how to situate my own relationship to the community, their vision and the land.

The above image (figure 28) seeks to illustrate why land rights is such a key issue for Indigenous people. The black cocky is missing and white cocky dominates. I think of the effect of colonisation and Australia, falsely labelled *terra nullius* for over 200 years. Aboriginal people have been profoundly disempowered when removed from their lands. In the following sections I explore what it means when black cocky is placed back in the picture, in particular when Aboriginal people receive recognition for their rights to land through native title. Are they empowered to become true hosts, with the implication that non-Indigenous people become guests

in their lands? Or is native title a counterfeit concept, granting some rights within Australian law but falling short of recognising Aboriginal people's right to be hosts in their own lands and home? In other words can "rights" and "entitlements" restore deep reciprocity and mutual obligations? I also explore what it means to be an ally in this long struggle for land rights, drawing on a past alliance which has taken place between church workers and the people of Mowanjum.

My story of the 2011 determination is set at Yalun, a place which is particularly important for many Worrora people living at Mowanjum because it is the closest coastal outstation to Mowanjum. It takes four hours by boat to reach Yalun if the tides are right and generally seven hours by 4WD. I was one of several non-Indigenous people who gathered on the beach at Yalun to hear and record an historic moment in the life of the Mowanjum people. Several Elders asked me to attend this event and gave me the responsibility of repairing their totems (dance boards), then ensuring that they were transported so that they could be part of the dance to accompany the Native Title Determination. I felt privileged to be part of this day, and be involved in a collaborative enterprise.

My journey began at Mowanjum, as I helped to prepare for the journey to Yalun. I wrote in my journal:

I worked on the lightning rods this morning and a canoe (totem board shaped as a canoe) which I made several years ago under an Elder's direction. I have been told that we are leaving around 6:00 am tomorrow morning so that we need to be ready by then. This afternoon we will pack up the totems ready to take on the early morning boat. The totem work was more demanding than I expected. One of the Aboriginal young men broke his totem and I had to help him fix it then spend the afternoon completing it. I wasn't happy with the result but at least it looks all right. To my horror we broke the second one in our hasty packing. This meant that I had to seek out the help of a friend to mend it quickly (Personal journal, May 2011).

On reflection, I can see that I was caught up in the intensity of the moment. It reminded me of assisting with the Mowanjum Festival. The young Aboriginal man who went home demonstrated the difference in approaches between mine and his. He was content to let things be, even if not finished. I, on the other hand, needed to finish the totems and take responsibility. My Aboriginal friend and Elder Donny was taking responsibility for hosting this important event. He obviously felt the strain of the moment, too. I wrote, "It was good to connect with Donny tonight. He looked very tired as this exercise has stressed him, with a lot of work and coordination. I am glad that we



are travelling with him tomorrow. Hopefully, I will provide extra support for his work” (Personal journal, May 2011).

My task was to transport the totems to the dinghy and to ensure that they were well-packed to endure difficult seas. Donny’s grandson skippered me around the Kimberley coast under his grandfather’s watchful eye, who skippered a larger boat that followed us. It was extremely pleasing to accompany this fifteen-year-old because he represents the future and this whole event was about the future. We endured choppy seas and a problem with the boat which threatened to sink us, but we arrived safely at Yalun with the totems in need of repair. I spent the remaining daylight hours making these necessary repairs using fishing line and drift wood which I found on the beach.

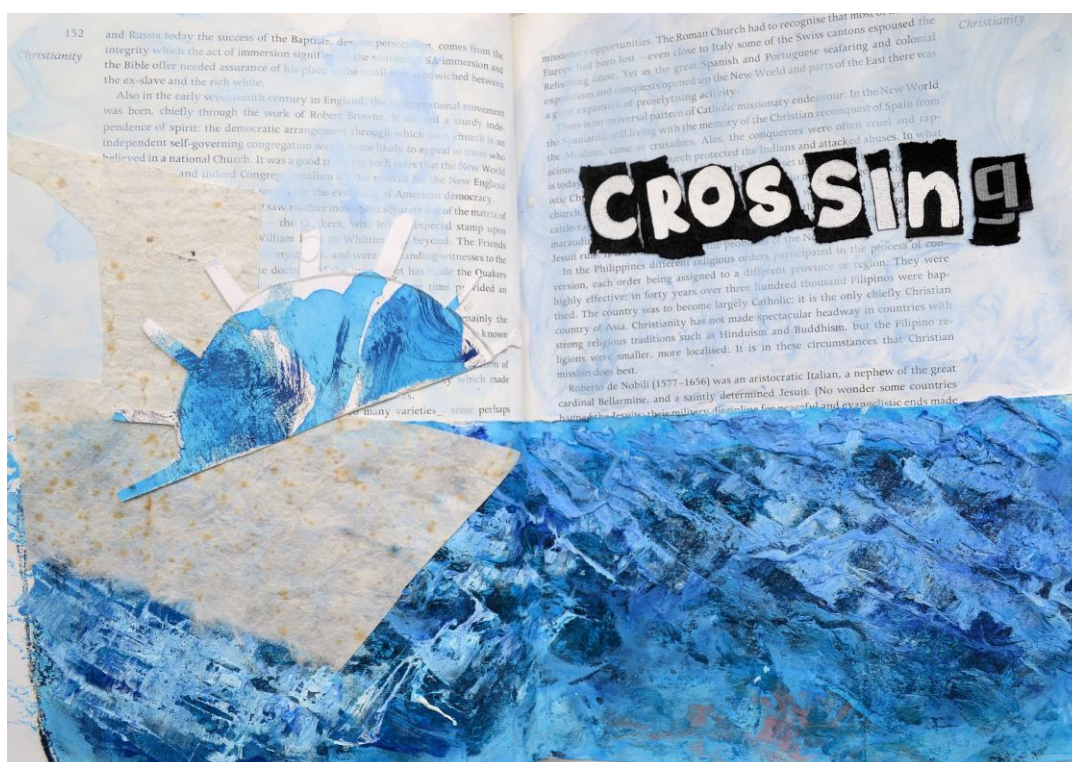


Figure 29: Crossing to Yalun

The 2011 Native Title Determination was a sitting of the Federal Court on the Yalun beach. This meant that over 100 people arrived by helicopter, boats and sea planes, gathering in the marquee which the local rangers had prepared. A group had driven the overland track. They finally arrived after forty-eight hours, at the time when their family were about to ask the police to search for them. They had been stuck in the mud at least twenty times. This was not surprising given that parts of the track follows the water courses.

Justice John Gilmour was late, having had difficulties with the helicopter. A contingent of Aboriginal people in traditional dress greeted the Judge and led him and others through a smoking ceremony. It was important that the people were hosting this event and clearly established that the Judge and his entourage were their guests. Thus the first and most important act was to secure their relationship with the land through the smoking. I followed the people and the visitors as they walked through a haze of smoke – a reminder that we were entering sacred ground and being caught up in Aboriginal law as much as they were involved in the legal system of the dominant white culture. In the act of smoking, I was being acknowledged and welcomed with others as a guest of the Mowanjumb people and of the land.



Figure 30: Smoking the people

The smoking ceremony expresses the fact that Aboriginal people have a radically different understanding of law from the Western legal concepts, including native title. Their Law is rooted in the land, and relationships with both the land and the creator spirits of the land. This is expressed in the name *Wanjina Wunggurr* – the *Wandjina* and *Wunggurr* are creation spirits with the power to give and nurture life. The act of smoking brings the visitor into a proper relationship with both the land and the spirits of the land. Traditional dancers naturally followed the smoking because they carry the story and the Law of the *Wandjinas* and other creator spirits. I found the dances to be an equally moving part of the ceremony and felt personally involved. They were using the totems that I had carried from Derby and repaired in the wake of sea damage. I was



concerned that they should not fall apart, as I had to use fishing line to tie two of them so that they would survive the dancing. I took a photo of the Elders set against the backdrop of Cone Bay. This small group of people had navigated the vicissitudes of our Western legal system. They had remained true to their own Law and beliefs in the face of intense resistance. I felt very proud of my Aboriginal friends.

The program then shifted to the sitting of the Federal Court. It seemed strange to see the formalities of the court complete with black gowns (fortunately no wigs) on this remote beach. At one level, it seemed a déjà vu of previous colonial courts imposed on British colonies and Indigenous peoples. But, by sitting on the beach, away from Canberra or in a regional city such as Broome, the Court regarded this as an attempt to recognise the cultural sensitivity of the local people. This symbolic action demonstrates that the Court theoretically has made a step toward recognition of the Laws and rights of Indigenous peoples. The question remains whether or not the law will back up this recognition with practical action.

I took the opportunity to record the speeches of the Court and took some video footage. I had intended to be creative in this recording, but found myself caught between serving the needs

of the Elders who at times called me to take care of various incidentals, and trying to record. Thus my video footage is of poor quality, as the needs of the Elders were of first priority. The program finished with a feast of barramundi obtained from the local fish farm in the middle of Cone Bay (figure 31). This was an equally important symbol, for it showed that Aboriginal people took their hospitality role very seriously.



Figure 31: The feed

I spent the next day relaxing with my friends, fishing and exploring the water ways. This was the time to unwind and to allow the land to heal after the stress imposed by the ceremony. The crowds who gathered the previous day had gone, including the Federal

Court. Donny took me and a group of children in a boat, trawling the waters in an attempt to catch barramundi. Surprisingly we caught nothing. It did not matter; it was very pleasant idling through

the mangroves, allowing the serenity of the day and the place to compensate for the effects of the days before.

The journey ended badly for me as I battled food poisoning. Donny and other friends took care of me while driving me to Broome for the flight home. I returned to Melbourne and to my research, feeling that the land was of key importance to the people of the Kimberley. I continued to believe in my hypothesis that collaboration with the people as they returned to their traditional lands was of great importance. The Native Title Determination and entire trip gave me the confidence to explore further what it means to journey with the Mowanjum people as they return to their traditional lands.

## **4.2 Allies in a long term land rights struggle**

The Native Title Determination at Yalun is but one small chapter in a larger story of struggle for land rights spanning many decades, not only in the Kimberley but for Indigenous people Australia wide. I felt an ally in a small way, noting that I was one of many non-Indigenous people who had assisted the people of Mowanjum in this struggle.

The term “ally” is used for those nations or groups that work together for some common justice purpose. Canadian Indigenous scholar Leanne Simpson (2010) states that little has been written about the nurture and solidarity given by friends and allies with Canadian Indigenous peoples in their struggles for self-determination and social and environmental justice (p. xiii). Lynne Davis (2010) sought to rectify this by gathering together Canadian writings under the heading of “alliances”. In Davis’ understanding, such alliances can become microcosms of the colonial relationship with issues of power and control. Alliances are also possible sites of learning and transformation, and/or sites of pain offering the opportunity to address the impacts of colonialism. By sites of pain, Davis implies that the effects of colonialism are still prevalent. For example, many Mowanjum people cope with living in exile, in lands which are not theirs traditionally, and experiencing a lifestyle which seems alien to their cultural background. One of Davis’ seminal sources was Anne Bishop (2002), who also provides practical advice on alliance building. Bishop notes several different kinds of alliances including those “partners walking side by side” where “Indigenous and non-Indigenous partners may come together around a specific agenda to accomplish a particular set of goals over a period of time” (Bishop, cited in Davis, 2010, p. 5). This stance contrasts with those relationships in which non-Indigenous partners take the lead and therefore the position of superiority. The term ally can refer to groups/nations working together in the cause of justice (or for ill-gotten ends). It can also apply to individuals. Davis (2010) argues that while the focus is often on Indigenous/non-Indigenous inter-group

interactions, “it is the individuals who interact, whatever the groups or institutions that stand behind them” (p. 349).

Jen Margaret, a *Pākehā* (New Zealander of European descent) offers further insights into the meaning of “ally” (Margaret, & Auckland Workers’ Educational Association, 2013). One of her respondents, community development worker Tim Howard, defines an ally as one whose responsibility is to help non-Indigenous people “to work together and respond to the general calls” from Indigenous people (p. 33). An ally balances “being in relationship of respect with Maori, with *tangata whenua* (local people, the indigenous people of the land), and actually acting that out” (p. 39). Margaret writes that the concept of ally “can become meaningless if its use is not aligned with action” (p. 192). I agree, but there is a danger that action be over-emphasised and the importance of relating sidelined.

The word “ally” reflects the ongoing struggle for political and social change that we – the Uniting Church and before that the Presbyterian Church – have been engaged in for decades with the people of Mowanjūm. The struggle began in the late 1960s when church workers assisted the Mowanjūm people as they travelled to their lands. On reflection, I became one further ally in a long journey of alliance. This awareness made it clearer that my journey to Majaddin with Eddie Bear was also as an ally in his continuing determination to reconnect with his traditional lands (see chapters 3 and 6).

### **4.3 Early struggles to return to land**

The *Worrorra*, *Ngarinyin* and *Wunambal* people’s determination to return to their lands reflected that wider Indigenous fight for land rights since the early 1960s. I illustrate this local struggle against key national markers. I also provide examples of support given by Presbyterian and Uniting Church ministers and other workers, illustrating their roles as allies in this long journey. Land rights reached national attention in 1963 with the Yirrkala Bark Petitions to the Federal Parliament (Clark, 2008, pp. 93-121). The subsequent history of this modern fight for land rights was marked by key events such as the Gurindji people’s walk off the Wave Hill Cattle Station in 1967, the Whitlam Labor Government’s handing back of Gurindji land in 1975, and the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act*, 1976 (Broome, 2010, p. 145, pp. 230-235). The Homelands Movement, which re-asserted Aboriginal ownership of the land and its resources, was also a direct outcome of this struggle (Coombs, 1994, p. 43). The Rev Jim Downing, a Uniting Church minister and social worker and Munti Smith (1988) state that this movement is not something new but “been going on ever since Aboriginal people were forced into or attracted to the larger settlement and mission communities” (p. 54). The movement accelerated during the

seventies (pp. 54-55). Land rights and the Homelands Movement (for those Aboriginal people wanting to return to their traditional lands) coincided with the major agenda of Aboriginal self-determination and sovereignty playing out across Australia in the 1970s. The Tent Embassy in Canberra on Australia Day, 26 January 1972 (and re-established in 1992 as a permanent fixture after being occupied intermittently) indicates that this fight for Aboriginal sovereignty continues (Clark, 2008, p. 203, Reconciliation Australia, 2012). This early fight is summarised in the following Timeline against key national events.

***TIMELINE- 1963 to the late 1970s***

<b><i>Date</i></b>	<b><i>National</i></b>	<b><i>Kimberley</i></b>
1963	Yirrkala bark petitions (August)	
1966	Wave Hill- walk off (August)	
1967	Referendum grants Commonwealth government power to legislate in Indigenous affairs (May)	
1970-1		Ecumenical Institute at Old Mowanjum supports land rights.
1972	Tent Embassy	Purchase of Panter Downs lease- to be renamed Pantijan.
1975	Gurindji Land Ceremony (August)	Mid to late 1970s Presbyterian ministers at Old Mowanjum supports early attempts to return to land.
Mid 1970s to early 1980s	Homelands Movement gained momentum during the 1970s	The development and management of the functioning cattle station at Pantijan- refer Joy Morlumbun's oral history below. Studies in the positive effects on health when living on land.

Coombs (1994) argues that since the 1967 referendum, Aboriginal groups pursued agendas of ownership of the land by “gaining access to it, using and occupying it”, and reasserting “their cultural heritage and their right to maintain, express and develop it” (p. 159). The people of Mowanjum and their non-Indigenous allies were committed to the land rights movement as well. The federal government purchased the Panter Downs Pastoral Lease in 1972 (to be renamed Pantijan). This was one of two purchases including Everard Park in South Australia (Coombs, 1978, p. 180). The lease, some 400 km northeast of Derby, was purchased for the training of many young *Worrorra* and *Ngarinyin* people for stock work. Senior Traditional Owners considered this

site an important place marked by *Wandjina* paintings and other significant sites in the area (Kimberley Land Council, 2004, p. 8).

The gaining of the Pantijan lease represented a milestone in the Mowanjum people's ongoing desire to return to their traditional lands, assisted by their church allies and other. According to Wayne and Gwen Masters, who worked at Mowanjum at the time, the Rev John Watts, Presbyterian superintendent minister responsible for the Presbyterian mission to Old Mowanjum, actively encouraged Mowanjum Elders and their families to return to land during his ministry in the 1960s (Recorded conversation, December 2013). The Rev Norman Cameron, also a Superintendent for Old Mowanjum, continued this support, assisting the people to investigate the purchase of the Pantijan lease. In the late 1960s the people of old Mowanjum were endeavouring to find effective ways to reconnect with their lands. Norman suggested to the people that they purchase a new boat which would give them the opportunity to reconnect with *Worrorra* lands along the coast. The people then were able to journey up the coast to Camden Harbour and found the old airstrip at Camden Harbour near Kunmunya with Sam Woolagoodja's assistance. Norman shared a key journey in which Donny's father Sam Woolagoodja and others repaired a World War II airstrip of termite nests so that the land would be accessible by air. A team went with hoes, axes and shovels to clear the old airstrip to make it accessible to planes. It was then used by the Kuri Bay cultured pearl industry. For Sam and others from Mowanjum, the clearing of the airstrip represented an earnest attempt to reconnect with their own lands (Recorded conversation, 29 May 2012). It was the beginning of new initiatives to ensure that this connection was not lost.

Norman recounted a journey in which he and others travelled to Walcott Inlet to investigate the possibility of the purchase of the Panter Downs lease. This would eventually form part of the Pantijan lease. Norman's ministry was cut short as the Presbyterian Church wanted to introduce an experimental ministry. Norman and the staff were informed at the end of 1970 that the Church had asked the Ecumenical Institute from Chicago to bring a ministry which recognised the importance of culture and the fact that "any social problem cannot be adequately responded to unless it is seen in relation to all others" (Barker, 2013). This initiative was consistent with the push for self-determination occurring at that time across Aboriginal Australia. The Presbyterian minister to follow Cameron, the Rev Jonathan Barker, writes of the next chapter in Mowanjum's life:

The community obtained Pantijan, the old Panter Downs cattle station near Mt York.  
The grant application to purchase this traditional tribal land and to manage it as a

cattle station was written while we were there but came through after we had left. Something interesting happened as a result of this. As some moved up to Pantijan (mainly upper *Worrorra* clans), others felt free to establish homeland settlements of their own. The Woolagoodjah-Umbagai clan for example has one at Cone Bay [Yalun] – keeping the fishing tradition alive. The Oobagooma family has a place at Oobagooma station -although the Army has also appropriated the land for military exercises (Barker, 2013, p. 7).

Barker (2013) described this time in the early 1970s as “an eventful time for Mowanjum”. The Australian Presbyterian Board of Missions appointed a new staff team “who had an understanding of or training in comprehensive community development” based on principles advocated by the Ecumenical Institute, which “had been first forged in the black urban ghetto of Fifth City, Chicago” (p. 1). He notes that three *Wandjinas* were painted on the interior back wall of the church in early 1972. These *Wandjinas* were chosen as representatives of the three language groups and expressed the continuing connection with land and the sacred places. But as Barker states, “The significance of this act was profound beyond imagination. It meant that their uniqueness as a people was totally affirmed. Sadly, this action also stirred a backlash amongst conservative white Christians in Derby and on the [Presbyterian Mission] Board” (p. 4). The act of painting the *Wandjinas* in the church continued to express the people’s essential connection with land, for the *Wandjinas* both reminded them of their lands and in a sense brought the land into their midst.

The Rev Bill Edwards, who followed the Ecumenical Institute group, was an ally in a different way. The Presbyterian Board of Missions appointed Edwards in 1972 for an interim ministry at Mowanjum. Edwards provided the administrative support to enable the initial Mowanjum Aboriginal Corporation to be set up, which in turn provided the administrative structure to incorporate the Pantijan lease. Edwards worked for land rights for the Pitjantjatjara people in northwest South Australia in the late 1970s and then translated the terms of the special trust set up by the South Australian government to the traditional owners (Edwards, 1986).

Thus the Pantijan lease proved to be a key marker in the Mowanjum people’s quest for land rights. I spoke with *Worrorra* Elder Joy Morlumbun about the importance of this lease. She began by saying that “We have to be out there [in the bush] because nobody will be looking after our parent’s home” (Recorded conversation, 9 October 2012). This comment sums up what Eddie shared with me when we visited Majaddin – namely the importance of continuing that traditional connection with family lands. Joy was at Pantijan from the beginning when it was established as



Mowanjum's pastoral lease. As Joy recounted, it had buildings out there at that time from the old Panter Downs Station, but her father lived there with tents and swags. It was, however, a functioning cattle station. As Joy recounted, "That was the big thing when they had that cattle export from Derby. They drove them through Munja and from there they put it on a ship. They brought them across to the old jetty at Munja". Joy reminded me of the intense connection between Mowanjum and that part of the world around Western Kimberley. She stated: "And when the people came into town they usually congregated at the Myall's Bore. And we used to meet them, walk from Mowanjum going and meeting them. When they used to have their races and rodeo, they would have the rodeo down at the race course. They used to keep the cattle at Myall's Bore".

They would take the livestock to an abattoir at Broome. Joy's family were the caretakers of Pantijan when Wattie Nurdu the manager needed to come to Derby to do his shopping. Joy recounted that her family were pleased to have their cattle: "They were on top of the world. You know when people got their land they did things marvellously". The granting of the Pantijan lease gave the people new hope in the struggle for land rights. Joy explained that her family visited people on the pastoral stations such as Eddie Bear's family. She stated that, "Other people were working at other stations and when they realised that they were given their own land to do their own thing that became an intensified thing. They changed to that relationship saying we own something. It belongs to us. It was like a change".

When I spoke to Joy later about this comment, she emphasised that Pantijan became a symbol of land rights and self-determination across the Kimberley. Those working and living on pastoral stations and receiving small amounts of money and poor food were very conscious of this new development. Joy summed up the importance of Pantijan to herself and others living there: "This was our own management". As Joy recounted, "They felt what they owned was something they owned. It was their own accord, their own management. It was an explosion, they left that lifestyle from that civilised way and came and managed their own".

Joy said that living at Mowanjum meant that people did not have the same sense of ownership as they did when not on their land. She replied, "We are on foreign land". Joy also made me aware of the connection between this return to land and health issues. She recounted how she had visited family members as a child on pastoral stations and had been appalled at the poor food they ate, particularly sugar and flour, both injurious to their health. Joy spoke of the work of dietician and academic, Kerin O'Dea, who organised several major studies on the impact of returning to land on diabetes prevention. She took part in an exploratory study in May – July

1977. Thirteen people from the Mowanjum community spent three months moving around the Leopold Ranges living on bush foods (O’Dea, Spargo & Akerman, 1980, p. 35). O’Dea concluded that the data suggests that the people’s abnormally high insulin response to glucose is ameliorated, but not normalised, when living *up-country*. However, the problem with this journey was that people remained in contact with Mowanjum and thus with non-bush foods. Later O’Dea (1984) undertook journeys to King Sound and then to Munja and Pantijan for a period of seven weeks. She concluded that the major metabolic abnormalities of Type II Diabetes were either greatly improved or completely normalised for this group from Mowanjum. Her research clearly demonstrated the positive effect that eating bush foods from traditional lands could have on diabetes prevention and reduction of a high insulin response to glucose. Unfortunately, the results of these and other studies did not lead to a dramatic change of behaviour and many of the Elders suffer from diabetes and cardio-vascular disease. The sedentary lifestyle, poor diet with high sugar content continues to be the norm at Mowanjum.

Returning to traditional country was not only vital for health and well-being. Downing and Smith (1988) write of this period in the late 1970s as marked by a release of creative energy as the Homelands Movement began to take effect in the Northern Territory. They note the “return to Aboriginal decision making and control, and to a more Aboriginal and unified life-style” (p. 97). This led to other benefits such as the strengthening of family authority and a growth in confidence. It also led to Kimberley Aboriginal people wanting similar land rights.

#### **4.4 The struggle intensifies**

Coombs (1994) writes that land rights “expresses the desire of Aborigines to acquire title to, and control of, land which they regard as theirs by traditional right and with which they identify in a complex and spiritually charged manner” (p. 39). This Aboriginal desire for land rights provoked resistance from the white community. Mowanjum and other communities seeking land rights faced resistance from the multinational and national corporate sector with mining and pastoral interests. They were intent on maximising profits, and thought Aboriginal issues competed with their interests, completing the dispossession of Aboriginal people. The mining and pastoral sectors were particularly strong in the Kimberley at the same time the *Ngarinyin* people sought land rights and economic autonomy. Kimberley Aboriginal people continued to seek justice in respect of their relationship with the land and their power for self-determination in the face of this opposition. Mowaljarlai and other *Ngarinyin* Elders from Mowanjum and other Kimberley communities were politically and personally involved from this period with the long

term aim of regaining their rightful and legal rights to their lands (p. 159). The following Timeline summarises this involvement within a wider political context.

### ***TIMELINE- 1980-2011***

<b><i>Date</i></b>	<b><i>National/State</i></b>	<b><i>Kimberley</i></b>
1980	Noonkanbah dispute with the West Australian Government	Mowanjum families support the Noonkanbah protestors (Indigenous and non-Indigenous)
1984	Paul Seaman QC inquires into Aboriginal land matters in Western Australia	<i>Ngarinyin</i> make an application for land rights, Kamali Land Council set up when this claim is rejected.
Mid to late 1980s		Uniting Church minister/social workers support Mowanjum people living at Pantijan.
1991		Kamali Land Council mount a land claim for three language groups- this was put aside pending the outcome of the High Court Mabo case.
June 1992	Mabo determination succeeds	
1993	<i>Native Title Act</i>	
1993-2004		<i>Ngarinyin</i> , <i>Wunambal</i> and <i>Worrorra</i> language groups fight for three independent native title claims lodged in 1996.
August 2004		<i>Ngarinyin</i> claim settled.
May 2011		<i>Worrorra</i> and <i>Wunambal</i> claims settled.

By the 1980s, the cry for land rights had grown substantially. The Burke Labor Government in WA, under pressure from Aboriginal groups to redress injustice concerning land rights, appointed Paul Seaman QC to inquire into Aboriginal land matters. Kimberley Aboriginal groups including the *Ngarinyin* made an application for land rights in 1984, but the Seaman Inquiry rejected their claim (Bell, 2009). David Mowaljarlai had already spent a decade as an

Aboriginal activist struggling for land recognition and therefore felt let down by this rejection. Bell (2009) recounts her journey with Mowaljarlai as he battled for land rights in her book *Storymen*. She recalls his frustration as he stated “We got little matchboxes, like pocket handkerchiefs. We are still cut off from the places that name us, our *wungudd*. What more do we have to prove?” As Bell points out, the matchboxes referred to the small excisions from pastoral leases which were given to communities along the Gibb River Road. Access to their traditional sites was dependent on the high cost of transport and the permission and cooperation of the pastoralists, “which was not always forthcoming” (p. 19).

The Uniting Church continued to support the Mowanjum people through the 1980s as they sought to regain connection with their traditional lands.<sup>1</sup> John Tomkins was employed by the church as a community development worker in the Kimberley region. He and the Rev George Woodward gave substantial support to Pantijan managers Watty Ngerdu and Joe Jorda. They supplied the transport to enable people to journey from Mowanjum to far away Pantijan over rough rocky tracks. The church later swapped one of the four wheel drives for a truck to enhance this service further. They were also asked to “assist with their resourcing, including bookwork and logistics relating to Pantijan Station affairs...The revenue for the community came from ‘chuck in’ money, which was money from the CDEP allowance which people contributed to the upkeep of Pantijan” (Unpublished notes for Mowanjum centennial, May 2013).

George Woodward and John Tomkins were interviewed for a video to record a recent centennial event at Mowanjum. George recalled the Seaman Inquiry and its effect on Mowanjum people:

Aboriginal people were talked to right across the state. And Aboriginal people at Mowanjum felt that land rights was going to happen. Then the government decided that they were not going to go that way. I remember the people saying, “We talked and it’s going to happen”. There was a sense of total dejection, denial, loss, betrayal by the Aboriginal people. So, I marched up the main street of Derby a couple of times with groups of Aboriginal people (Video recording, Mowanjum centennial, May 2013).

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<sup>1</sup> Old Mowanjum was a Presbyterian Mission. The Mowanjum Council became incorporated in 1972, with the support and encouragement from the Presbyterian Church leading to self-government by incorporation July 1974. The Uniting Church which was formed in 1977 from Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregation Churches continued to support the Mowanjum community.

This was a painful time for the people and for those who walked with them like George and John. As George stated, “the people dreamt about going back, even to Kunmunya that was still a dream when we were here twenty-five years ago”. The church assisted them, as John added, “helping people write letters and applications and things like that. There wasn’t a lot of heat in it but it was pretty critical for a lot of people. Mowanjum people had access to land, but isolation was one of the key problems: getting back”.

#### 4.5 Land claims and native title

Hannah Rachel Bell (2009), who worked with the *Ngarinyin* people, records that the Kamali Land Council was set up in 1984 in response to this failed attempt to gain recognition through the Seaman Inquiry. In 1991 Kamali mounted the Utemorra land claim with Daisy Utemorra, a famous Aboriginal storyteller, as plaintiff. This claim represented six clans covering almost 200,000 sq. kilometres of primary crown land, national parks, pastoral leases and offshore areas in the Western Kimberley. Because the *Mabo* case was yet to be determined, this claim was stayed. Each group then applied separately under the 1993 *Native Title Act* (pp. 20-21).

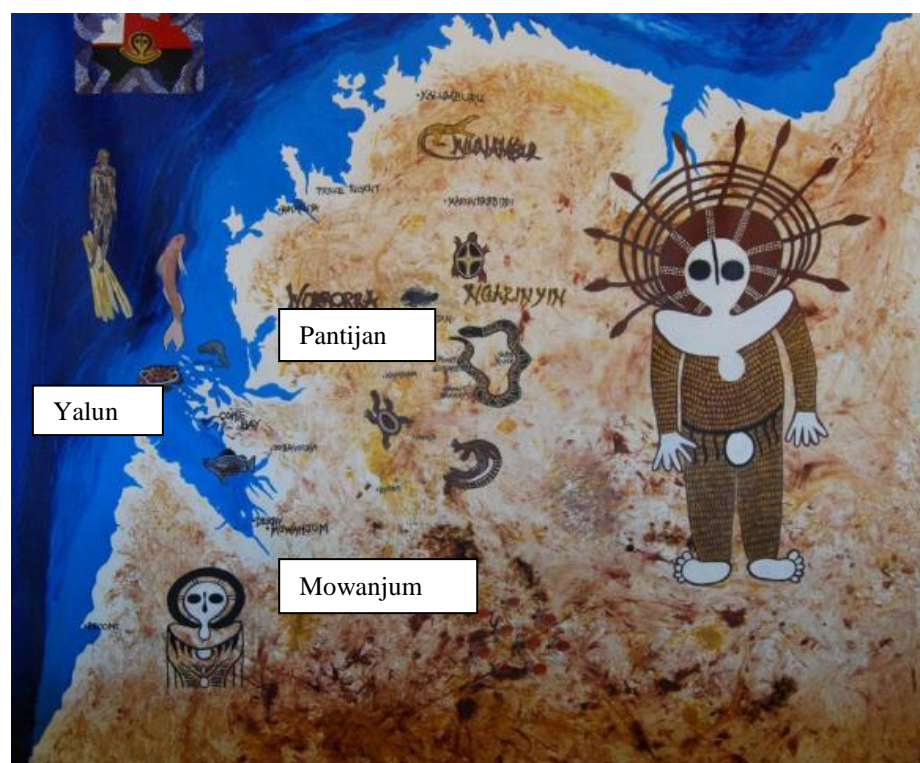


Figure 32: Map of the Kimberley showing *Worrorra*, *Ngarinyin* and *Wunambal* traditional lands - used by permission of Leah Umbagai (artist)

The *Mabo* case was resolved on 2 June 1992 with 1993 *Native Title Act* to follow. This decision had great relevance for the Mowanjum people’s claim, but they noted two obstacles: the

frailty and death of their Elders, and the refusal of the Commonwealth Government to fund their applications. The *Ngarinyin* lodged their claim at the National Native Title Tribunal in 1995, which the Western Australian government opposed because it supported mining and pastoral interests threatened by any redress to Aboriginal people. WA introduced the *Land (Titles and Traditional Usage) Act* 1993 designed to nullify the *Mabo* decision's implementation in WA. The Act purported to extinguish native title in Western Australia and to replace it with statutory rights to access to land for traditional use (AIATSIS, 2010, p. 2). In effect this would ensure control remained in the hands of the State rather than with Aboriginal groups such as the *Worrorra*, who brought a legal challenge (*Western Australia v Commonwealth*, 1995). The High Court overturned this Act in 1995 on the grounds that it violated the *Racial Discrimination Act* (RDA). This case established that the RDA could protect native title against a discriminatory state government and raised public awareness about the rights of Indigenous peoples (AIATSIS, 2010). The separate *Worrorra*, *Ngarinyin* and *Wunambal* native title claims could then be considered.

The church continued its support when in December 1991 the Uniting Church Assembly (UCA) was asked to help establish the Kimberley Land Claim Trust. The Trust laid a claim in the High Court for their traditional lands, claiming that their sovereignty over the land had never been extinguished. This action followed a resolution at the Sixth Assembly to support the efforts of the three language groups living at Derby/Mowanjum to safeguard their traditional land including access to their lands (UCA Assembly, 1991).

A UCA pamphlet *Mission Probe* invited church people to subscribe to a Trust to assist the *Ngarinyin* people in their land rights struggle. The pamphlet referred to the fact that many of the Kimberley pastoral leases have now become unviable. The *Mission Probe* further pointed out that the people originally living at Kunmunya and later Wotjulum moved to Mowanjum near Derby in 1956 with the intent of providing Aboriginal people with jobs which were thought to be there at the time. Since then, job prospects evaporated, and alcohol became prevalent. The Elders were determined to take their young back to traditional lands to teach them traditional ways. The work of the people was now (in 1991) to provide laborious legal proof, giving evidence of their sophisticated system of Laws and government. More than sixty people signed a statement which asserted their claim: "We were encouraged to leave our tribal land by various authorities after World War II, in 1949. But we did so on the understanding that we were free to return at any time. Since then, we have visited our lands to maintain culture and custody of them" (UCA Assembly, 1991).

The Rev Wally Johnson also became involved during the 1990s. He assisted the people in practical ways:

They would always be talking about going back to their country. So some of my trips were taking people back to country and leaving them to camp. The government was good too. The WA government provided some basic facilities like a roof to collect water so that there was a water tank and there were washing facilities and a toilet in some of those remote parts of the Kimberley (Video recording, Mowanjum centennial, May 2013).

The Mowanjum people showed dedication and commitment to continue even in the face of disappointment. David Mowaljarlai received the prestigious award of Aboriginal Person of the Year in 1995, the very year that Mowaljarlai and other *Ngarinyin* Elders represented themselves in their people's claim for native title. Later, Mowaljarlai and other Elders revealed important aspects of their culture to the world through both film and a book *Gwion Gwion* (Doring, 2000). Mowaljarlai with Paddy Neowarra inspired the "bush university" in 1993, an outstanding venture converting many of Australia's top lawyers into supporters of Reconciliation and their struggle for land rights.<sup>2</sup> Bell (2009) notes Mowaljarlai's words that this was a "*side-by-side, not a one on top of the other*" venture, emphasising its collaborative nature (p. 27). Whitefellas would bring their business knowledge while traditional owners would bring their knowledge of Law and survival in the country. The bush university became the chosen site for the following ABC Radio National *Law Report*.

Susanna Lobez of the ABC *Law Report* hosted a series of three programs in September 1996, four years after *Mabo* and in response to the *Ngarinyin* Native Title Claim (Lobez, 1996). She followed the progress of the bush university. She described her trips *up-country* as like going to a huge law library hearing about customary punishments, the role of apology and talking about the mediation of problems with other language groups. In her second report she described the relationship between the people and the pastoralists, stirred by the land claims which were happening under the *Mabo* legislation. The pastoralists were angry about any intrusion on "their lands" but were placated when the journalist visited them. The third part of the series dealt with issues concerning the need for an amendment to *The Native Title Act* that would allow *Ngarinyin* and other Aboriginal people the right to exercise their notion of sharing the land, "including

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<sup>2</sup> I capitalise Reconciliation when speaking of the national Reconciliation movement as distinct from small "r" reconciliation when writing of personal and less formal relating.

inviting whitefellas to come on to the land and to learn about the culture and their Law” (Lobez, 1996). This issue is yet to be resolved satisfactorily despite the fact that native title recognition has been granted to the *Ngarinyin* people. Anthropologist Tony Redmond later reflected on this period of conflict and misunderstanding after attending the *Ngarinyin* native title determinations in 2004:

In August 2004, Justice Ross Sundberg of the Federal Court delivered to *Ngarinyin* people the final determination of their native title which recognised their exclusive possession of nearly 30 000 square kilometres of their country in conjunction with the co-existent use and occupation of another 38 000 square kilometres of non-Indigenous owned pastoral leases. The ceremony to present this determination was held at Anbada (Mt Barnett station, an Aboriginal owned pastoral lease), in Gubungarri clan country, 300 kilometres up the Gibb River Road from the service town of Derby (Redmond, 2007, p. 79).

Redmond’s paper outlined the effect of the determination after the process had ignited tensions between the pastoralists and the *Ngarinyin* people. As Redmond noted, the judge declared “that the legal battle had been a bitterly fought one in which ‘no quarter’ was given by either side” (p. 80). The battle had been fought by the government as well as the pastoralists.

Originally the *Worrorra*, *Ngarinyin* and *Wunambal* peoples lodged their applications in 1996 as three separate claims. The *Worrorra* and *Wunambal* claim had to wait on the *Ngarinyin* claim, which was resolved in 2004 by court hearing, before their claims could be considered. The *Worrorra* Native Title Determination (*Wanjina Wunggurr*) required no formal court hearing as the *Ngarinyin* claim, but was made by agreement with the parties concerned. Fortunately the *Worrorra* claim did not meet similar opposition from pastoralists and miners. One wonders what would have happened if it had gone to a hearing. The claimants may not have been around – just as Eddie Mabo did not live to see a resolution of his famous case!

#### **4.6 The determination at Yalun**

The *Wanjina-wunggurr* Native Title Determination at Yalun on May 2011 marked the end of a process/conflict spanning over fourteen years since the formal lodgement of the *Worrorra* claim. As the people of the *Wanjina Wunggurr* write, “We have got back the country that we always knew belonged to us. This is a special occasion for our people because we have been fighting to be recognized as Traditional Owners for a long time” (Kimberley Land Council, 2011, p. 1). These three language groups who form the *Wanjina Wunggurr* are those of the *Worrorra*,



*Ngarinyin* and *Wunambal* groups, who have a common body of Laws and beliefs concerning the *Wandjina* and *Wunggurr*. The groups lodged claims in the Federal Court in 1996, 1999 and 2002 for native title recognition over various lands within the Kimberley region. Thus three native title claims and determinations affect the people of Mowanjumb. On 27 August 2004 the Federal Court issued a successful native title determination for the *Ngarinyin* people: the *Wandjina Wunggurr Wilinggin* claim meeting at Mt Barnett. Several years later, the *Wunambal* people received the *Wanjina Wunggurr Uunguu* determination at Kalumburu on 23 May 2011, and the *Worrorra* received the *Wanjina Wunggurr Dambimangari* determination at Yalun on 26 May 2011. Native title recognition enables the recipients the right to manage their cultural and natural resources (*Barunga v State of Western Australia*, 2011). It does not, however, protect the country from mining and other interests which may intrude upon their life.

I used a digital recorder to record the May 2011 native title determination. The process included an opening speech by J. Twomey, Counsel for the Applicant, who referred to the basis of the native title claim made by Victor Barunga (now deceased), Heather Umbagai (now deceased), Janet Oobagooma, Donny Woolagoodja, Nelson Barunga and two other men, now deceased. She



Figure 33: The judge lands

then spoke about the place, Yalun: “the Wunggurr place of the grandchildren of Janet Oobagooma and her late husband” (Transcription from personal recording, May, 2011). Twomey noted that:

The people of this country are those that follow *Wandjina* and *Wunggurr*, the Laws set down by *Wandjina* and *Wunggurr* have been in this place since time immemorial. The application under the Court seeks recognition of something very old, something that has always been in this country and will continue to be in this country when the children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren of those who gather today will have responsibility for this country (Transcription from personal recording, May 2011).

The Law of those who follow *Wandjina* and *Wunggurr* predates Australian law and extends both into the past and the future. Unlike Western promulgated law which changes with the vicissitudes of the government of the day, and common law building on precedents, Mowanjumb people see the *Wandjina* and *Wunggurr* as unchanging and written into the land. As Twomey stated, the name *Wandjina Wunggurr Unguu Dambimangari* recognises the unity of Spirit, land and people. She noted: “The application to be determined by the court today will complete the recognition by the common law of the rights and interests held by the *Wandjina Wunggurr* Community in this country since time immemorial”. The word “immemorial” reflects a Western understanding. It is certainly outside of the memory of non-Indigenous peoples, but given that the stories of creation (*Lai-lai*) are recounted by Aboriginal people, this term is hardly applicable in their understanding. This *Lai-lai* time is not immemorial but present in the land and the people’s relating to the land.

This statement suggests that Australian common law now recognises the rights and interests of Indigenous people. This is a tenuous recognition, as determinations and legislation since the 1992 *Mabo* ruling have limited the recognition of native title rights and indicated that there are many pressures in the wider community which could limit both the rights and the recognition (Strelein, 2009). In any case, the question remains whether this ancient Law can or even should be fitted into the common law of the dominant culture. Should there be a more equitable recognition and relationship between the two laws based on different ontologies and epistemologies?

Twomey then acknowledged the long commitment and struggle to achieve native title recognition. As she stated, “The practice of on country determinations of Native Title is costly, time consuming, logistically challenging, appropriately respectful and deeply appreciated” (Transcription from personal recording, May 2011). Justice Gilmour, in delivering a short judgment, approved the application and made an order recognising native title rights over a land

area which covers nearly 28,000 square kilometres. He noted that the application was lodged with the National Native Title Tribunal in 1996. The Judge stated that the “Laws and customs have been handed down from generation to generation” and that this predated *kardia*’s arrival. This is an essential point, given that native title can only be recognised where claimants can prove an unbroken connection and active traditional link to a particular land, predating white settlement in 1788 (Sharp, 1996, p. 15). This connection has been evident with the *Worrorra* and *Wunambal* peoples. In the case of the *Worrorra*, the people moved to Mowanjum on 20 November 1956 (Jebb, 2008, p. 93). They then undertook various journeys *up-country* to maintain their connection to their traditional lands, including “freshening” (repainting) the *Wandjinas* on important sites. Justice Gilmour declared that “the Court does not give Native Title; rather the Court determines that Native Title already exists. It determines that this is your land, and that Native Title is held according to your traditional Laws and customs and these have always been” (Transcription from personal recording, May 2011). In this moment the truth seemed to have been spoken.

The determination formalities concluded with the presentation of documents to the Elders and thank you speeches from several people. I was particularly moved when Heather Umbagai (now deceased) read a speech in *Worrorra* language. She translated a little of what she said: “this is God’s country and God gave this country to her fathers” (Transcription from personal recording, May, 2011).

#### **4.7 Conversations with *Worrorra* Elders**

I taped two important conversations with Elders who were part of the Native Title Determination. Both conversations illustrate the importance of land, but also the need for further struggle to be their own authority on their land and thus to control their destiny. I spoke with *Worrorra* Elder Janet Oobagooma, a Traditional Owner and member of the Uniting Church, at Cone Bay on the day following the determination. Although tired, she obliged me by talking about her understanding of native title. We began the conversation with detail concerning Yalun, Cone Bay. When asked why Yalun is special, Janet replied that it was good to live here, particularly as there are special *Unggud* places (Recorded conversation, 24 May 2011). She remembered the development of the outstation in the early eighties, stating that “The real old people lived in harmony”.

We continued the conversation talking about the importance of land. Janet replied: “This is our land. But lots of things has happened in the past. Saying mine, it’s mine! I boss. You know. That wasn’t the right words”. I searched for words to reply to Janet and said that her people have not acted as the boss. Janet continued, “For their land. But in their clan groups, someone comes

along and says; I'll do it this way. More better way. Sometimes it is not really better. It's not really better. What do you think?" There are moments when Janet challenges me by asking a deep question. This was one of them. I responded, "I think that you, the *Worrorra* people have to find your way. What's critical is finding your way. On your land, and no one else can tell you that. We can support you, and be behind you, but we can't tell you what to do. That is what has been done in the past".

My reply affirmed her own point of view. Janet responded: "But we want to do things our way!... Someone will still say that we are doing it wrong. We have to be told some places. In our own, in our own rules, in Aboriginal rules. Or you know, is that a right word to say?" I replied: "I would have thought it was very right. It's your Law operating, not whitefella law". Janet responded by talking about the relationship between Aboriginal Law and the Old Testament:

Now these days, young people say that we put one step back like we are going backwards. But we just talking about the history. What was in the past, just like the Old Testament. You know, we call that Old Testament rules. And it's still in the Aboriginal way, you know. Like the ten commandments was given in the Old Testament time, Old Testament time. But Jesus came he didn't throw that away. He still went forward with that (even though he brought a new way). Yes. He brought it together. To make it one. You know.

Janet then asked me to send the video on native title that I would be presenting to the Uniting Church on her behalf. Then, unexpectedly, Janet spoke of the mining debate. She stated: "There's those mining people who 'b...' up the country. They want it for riches. To me it should stay as normal". I agreed that "You don't sell your country". Janet agreed: "Yes, even if I'm poor I don't care. Because that's what life is". I replied that it is going be one of the big struggles. The temptation is to sell out. Janet summed up her thoughts with the following words:

I hear a lot of *kardias* say, "I will give you this. I will give you so much money". You know, make people fall for it. But I think that it's not right. When I see this in myself you know. I don't know about other peoples, you know. This is a new era, new times. We are not forgetting that Jesus will come, one day he will come, he will come to gather his people. This is our land but lots of things have happening in the past, saying it's mine, it my land.

I was conscious of Janet's tiredness, yet as I reflect on this conversation I am aware of its depth and pertinence to the issue of native title. She ends with the reference to the biblical Second

Coming. Perhaps this is her way of saying that the injustice will eventually be put right. Although we did not talk directly about native title, the issues we did discuss are relevant to it. Janet wants to relate to her land in her way and not to be subject to an external authority, a “boss”. Her distrust of *kardia* and his duplicitous approach to many issues is understandable and for good reason. I am aware of her being let down on many occasions in her dealing with non-Indigenous individuals and authorities. The issue of mining is omnipresent and has the potential to disturb and fracture the country and the community. An example of this is the recent struggle around James Price Point. Although Woodside Petroleum ultimately suspended its plans to develop a gas well at this location, the WA government presses on to establish this place as an operational centre for future development. The intended development split the Broome community and threatens the integrity of a cultural Dreaming space (Wilson-Chapman, 2013). The matter is yet to be resolved. Another example is the declaration of a marine park in *Worrorra* lands. WA Premier Colin Barnett announced the formation of the Kimberley Wilderness Park in October 2010 but, as the KLC explained, the Traditional Owners are seeking joint management of this important resource (Kimberley Land Council, 2010).

The second conversation was with Donny Woolagoodja, who had been responsible for hosting the event at Yalun. Donny is notable for navigating the complexities of two cultures: their traditional Aboriginal culture and Western. He is an asset both to their community and the wider Australian community. Of course, he has not engaged this alone but with non-Indigenous collaborators such as anthropologist Valda Blundell. Donny in particular saw the limitations of native title, watered down by further High Court determinations and Commonwealth legislation since *Mabo*.

I asked Donny what he wanted to say about the event and about the issue of native title. Donny agreed to the conversation, but on his terms. He took me to the wetlands near Derby. He needed to speak on the land to talk about such a significant issue. I have also been very aware that Donny does not need or want non-Indigenous people including myself to interpret his point of view. It is important that his words speak for themselves. Accordingly, I have included paragraphs from our conversation without commentary.

The story of the struggle for land, as Donny tells it, begins with disquiet at the move to Mowanjumb and away from land. As he states:

You had people like Wattie Nuedu and Albert Barunga, Alan Maloom, David Mowaljarlai. All these people that what now fighting to go back to their country and this country wasn't suiting them. So they seen what was happening from this part of

the country you know like this town and they didn't like the way that this thing was happening so they said, let's think of something that we will be proud to have so they first got some title they got Pantijan and took all the young people out there to have some dry out (Recorded conversation, 12 July 2011).

According to Donny, Black Americans from the Ecumenical Institute worked with the people at Mowanjum between 1971 and 1973 (refer 4.3 above) and made the observation: "You've got the rights for your country". Donny stated:

They showed the people how to be themselves. So that's where it really started you know. Then they got the idea of it. And they started claiming native title and then we started doing mapping. All the people, not me but the old people did that. They marked out areas where people used to go. That's how it all started. And then we kept it going. When they all passed away, we kept it going. We were fighting for land rights since the eighties.

I asked Donny about his connection with the land, commenting that the judge at the May native title determination said, "I can't give you native title, I can recognise that it is you who determine it". Donny replied:

He didn't have to tell us that. But we knew all the time from our ancestors, from great, great ancestors were telling the stories but they are all gone. We are still here but we fight and we got it and we are proud that they started something that we didn't have. We didn't have to fight for it more longer that they did you know. Really all the credits should go to all the people that really fought for it you know. We should be proud because they did it.

I asked Donny about the meaning of native title for him, noting that the celebrations had been joyful and people had a sense that they had achieved something significant for the future. He responded:

You can have native title but we still don't have the power to own it (the land). You know it's like they recognise us but they did not really give us the land. See, when I was asking Valda and Kim [anthropologists] about it they said, "You can't you can't it's just like when whiteman you can buy a block but if Government wanted to take it away he come and take it". It is just something that nobody didn't work it out how they be with that matter yet.

Donny was concerned that he did not have the right to build on this land, but had to apply to the West Kimberley Council. Also talking with his anthropological friends, Donny became conscious of the limited rights of native title, which permit him to stop some people from coming and destroying the land, but not others. He stated: “You can stop people from going there. You can fight for your rights, but in another sense you haven’t got the right to stop mining or government to go and do what they want”.

Furthermore, Donny was concerned about the latent and hidden issues in native title:

I mean we’ve got to have a lot of explaining you got lot of people to explain what native title means you know and what’s inside of it. You know, like me and you say native title. It’s OK to have all these things, but we don’t know that’s inside it. That you know the rules, rules of how you can deal with native title.

Later Donny added: “Well you have to find out if native title is stronger than treaty. So we have to learn that if treaty is better for our people or this native title, because, most of our native title was taken away from us. When Mabo, when they seen Mabo did it, they cut all the main things off”. Donny has clearly recognised the complexity of native title and knew that it is necessary to understand it before he could operate within the framework. As he says, the fight is not over. He recognises the difference between ownership of the land, as in freehold title, and the weak form of acknowledgement of native title rights. He looks to the emergence of a new generation to take the matter further and to investigate the detail implicit in native title:

Yeah, we can see it because we haven’t the time to keep fighting. But maybe the next generation people will see that but one thing we have to do is we can hire a lawyer through *Dambi* [Shorthand for *Dambimangari*] and explain it more and more because you need more explanation on native title. We got the native title but we need more explaining.

When I first heard the judge say that the Court does not give native title for it already exists and such title is held according to traditional Laws and customs, I was impressed. However, the statement overlooks the fact that native title is a Western and not an Indigenous concept. Now, after reading the literature and conversing with *Worrorra* Elders Janet Oobagooma and Donny Woolagoodja, I have questions. What does this statement really mean when all that has occurred is that the dominant culture has made limited space for recognition of the rights of Aboriginal people and for the full exercise of those rights? The judge’s statement means that we (the dominant culture) recognise Aboriginal rights within the limitations imposed by our Law. This is

radically different from recognising the special relationship that Aboriginal people have to their land through *their* Laws.

#### 4.8 The struggle continues

So the struggle for recognising the Traditional Owners' right to land continues. Although forced to make a home near Derby, the people have continued to see their cultural, spiritual and Law roots in traditional lands far from where they were living. As Donny noted in his summary, they struggled not only to return to their lands but to have ownership rights over their lands. This intense struggle arises from the people's enduring connection to their traditional lands and the Creator Beings that are part of the land – in the caves and other *Wunggurr* places. Donny's and others' calls for justice resonate with the words of Gurindji Elder Vincent Lingiari to the Governor-General in 1967. He stated, "Our people have lived here from time immemorial and our culture, myths, dreaming and sacred places have evolved in this land. Many of our forefathers were killed in the early days while trying to retain it. Therefore we feel that the land is ours and should be returned to us" (Sieper, 2006). There is a fundamental clash of value systems inherent in native title and land rights. The doctrine of *terra nullius* and the system of common law which operated since colonisation in 1788 did not recognise nor value the relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their land. This led to the wrong questions being asked in legal cases concerning land and Indigenous rights to land.

This lack of recognition continues. Academic Gary Johns (2011), arguing from a Western individualistic (and rational) philosophy, states that the dream (of whitemen) "that Aborigines could live collectively and separately from the rest of Australia, has turned sour" (p. 15). He quotes Aboriginal leader Noel Pearson, who states that policy makers should move beyond the "campaign Aboriginal" fighting for the recognition of land. He lists a number of dysfunctional lifestyles to illustrate the alleged failures of self-determination and for many Aboriginal people in Northern Territory (NT) and Western Australia (WA), the Homelands Movement, ignoring the larger issues of governments and a community unable to accept a people living on the basis of a relational ontology and who hold their relating to their land and family as of prime importance (pp. 39-74). Johns argues that poverty is not helped if people are paid to stay in a poor area on an outstation. His maxim is "no job, no house", together with the argument that Aboriginal people can stay on their lands if they become economically independent (pp. 42 and 262). Johns criticises Aboriginal people for allowing culture and land to disrupt the Australian economic agenda – namely employment and individual ownership of land and resources. He argues that Aboriginal people must fit in with the dominant economy, rather than the economy and political situation



accommodating the first people of the land and their acknowledging their unique relationship with it. Johns therefore argues that Aboriginal people should leave their collective identity to be individuals in Australian society. They may then gain education, work and a house to live in with the consequence that they be dislodged from land, culture, and family (p. 51).

Johns' arguments seem a return to the assimilationist policies prior to self-determination. According to historian Bain Attwood (2005), assimilation policies had two ideals: individual civil rights and a unitary nation. These ideals were entangled with each other. Such ideas assumed that "history is a story of progress that would inevitably culminate in the triumph of European modernity" (p. 271). In simple terms, "we" wanted Aboriginal people to become like us, for their sakes but for the good of the whole nation. This was an obnoxious policy. Unfortunately, such thinking, as historian Anna Haebich (2008) argues, "haunts present day public debate on national identity and nationhood" (p. 7). Indeed, Johns' argument actually seems to resurrect this argument.

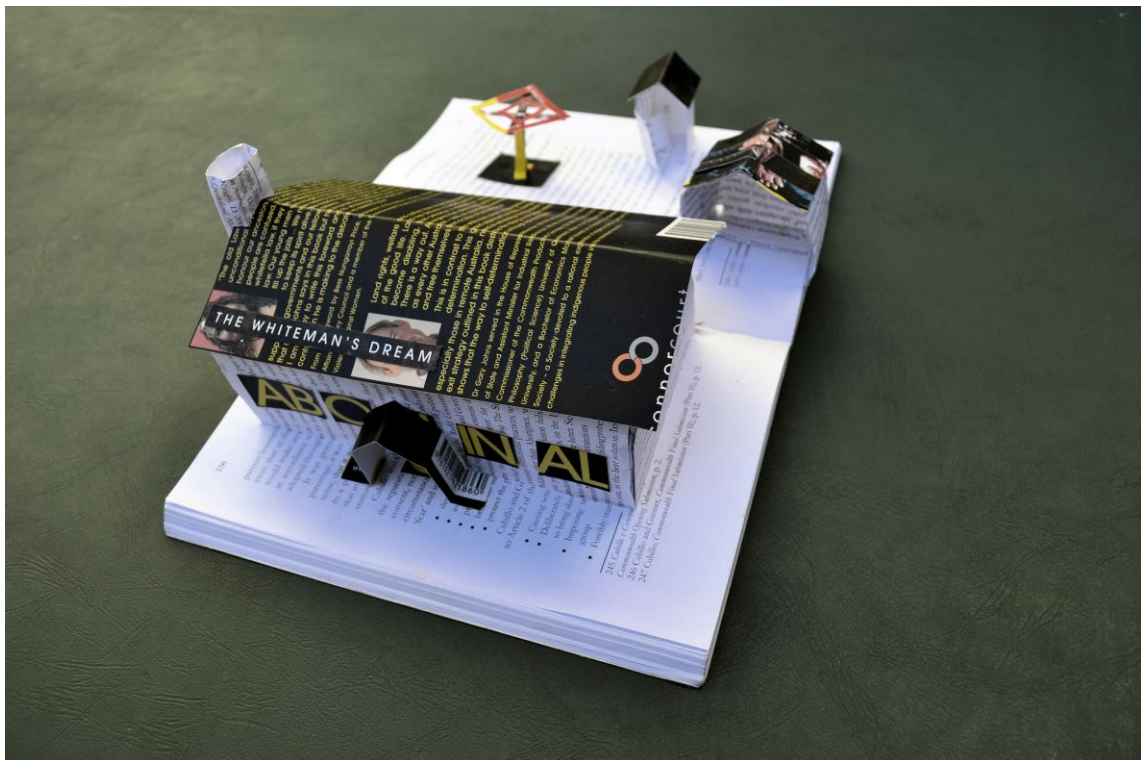


Figure 34: Whiteman's dream

My conversations with Donny and others from Mowanjum led me to a clearer understanding of why I find Johns' arguments so offensive. Relationship with the land and culture is vital for the well-being of the people, both young and old. Joining the "mainstream economy" denies them their distinctive culture and social framework that continues to relate to land even though they are a displaced community. Throughout my research I have been mindful of Johns'

challenge to Aboriginal people retaining their connection with land and culture. His work reflects whitefella resistance and inability to understand the significance of land for Indigenous people such as those from Mowanjum. Eddie Bear's and Donny's vision, in contrast, offers the opportunity for people to regain their connections with land, culture and family in its larger sense. They also offer the opportunity for non-Indigenous Australians such as the Boab Network to join with them in the development of this vision. Our collaborative work as allies with the Mowanjum people challenges a rational individualistic and integrative approach and is closer to a social justice approach which affirms the continuation of a distinctive culture that has been part of this land for tens of thousands of years.

I expressed my contention with Johns' premise and arguments through art. I made an "altered book" calling the work, *Whiteman's dream*. I allowed a sixties-style house to emerge with the thought that Johns and others want Aboriginal people to leave their connection with land and culture for this. It is such a poor alternative for Aboriginal people who, as I was privileged to experience, have an extraordinary connection with their country.

The people of Mowanjum, as part of the three major language groups *Worrorra*, *Ngarinyin* and *Wunambal*, now have native title rights over a substantial portion of Kimberley lands. As I have shown, this resulted from a long struggle assisted by the Uniting Church as well as many anthropologists and other supporters. As I reflected on what I had experienced at Yalun, and my conversations with Janet and Donny, it became clear that native title is flawed. Not only is it flawed because it originated from a non-Indigenous legal framework, but the original vision of the *Mabo* determination had been weakened by subsequent legislation. As Donny states, "most of our native title was taken away from us" (Recorded conversation, 12 July 2011).

Legal academic Lisa Strelein (2009) concludes her history of native title law in Australia with the words: "The settlement reached in *Mabo* was compromised" (p. 149). Her words echo Donny's. He was aware of this compromise and recounted his experience of the way in which governments had discriminated against Aboriginal people. The people had won a victory in gaining native title rights, but the issues that Donny raises are complex and demand further reflection. Is native title a watered down version of land tenure that in the end means very little and remains open to the whims of governments and mining companies? Will the people, particularly the new generation, see benefits of returning to land and use native title as an opportunity for engendering this vision amongst the young? I wonder, too, whether it may be too late for the people and the land to reap benefits from native title. Will the new generation succumb to the constant pressure to leave their culture and land to find a place in the wider dominant

Australian culture? Is native title too complex for the benefits given, and will this complexity add further pressure on future generations to turn away from their culture and land?

#### **4.9 Native Title: a conflicted way of being**

Native title was meant to bridge the chasm between two systems of law, Aboriginal and White, which are grounded in different ontologies or ways of relational being. Aboriginal Law arises from the land itself while common law is imported from another land and state of being. So too is the continuing reinterpretation of the enacted law by the judiciary which bases its decisions on a radically different philosophical viewpoint. As I experienced the determination and spoke with Donny and others, I experienced the tension between the elation of victory from a long fought struggle and the awareness that this struggle must continue. A new generation needs to understand the implications of native title and work with opportunities that might arise from it. I listened to Donny explain what it meant to be vulnerable to governmental changes and his confusion because native title raised more questions than it answered.



Figure 35: Tinny

I allowed Donny's comments and my general questions regarding native title to "cook" within me and developed a sculpture which I call Tinny. I fashioned this "craft" from the pages that I had ripped out of a racist book of the 1960s. I then reshaped them into a copy of the boat

that took me to Yalun. *Tinny* is my intuitive response to native title. As much as we celebrated this small victory in the long struggle for land rights, native title raises many issues and seems vulnerable to erosion through government intervention. The image of *Tinny* represents both the long journey that was and is required as the people struggle for their land, but also the precarious nature of their current position. The sculpture thus serves as an introduction to the chapter to follow which incorporates my story of involvement within this larger journey and also raises questions about native title.

*Tinny* expresses the vulnerability of native title. The sculpture, like native title, is fashioned from paper and words, in contrast to Aboriginal Law which is grounded in the earth and written on the caves. Native title, which is framed to recognise Aboriginal rights, assumes the value system of the dominant culture. It is a strange craft indeed!



Figure 36: White cocky mask

I also responded to my experience at Cone Bay, my conversations with Donny and Janet, and my readings on native title by making a White Cocky mask along with accompanying piece of prose. The work was performed within a small group and the mask exhibited at Augustine Uniting Church (Auburn, Melbourne) between November 2011 and January 2012 (See Appendix 5 for the script of the White Cocky Performance and the Artist Statement).

This idea for making a mask came from facilitating a group for a postgraduate unit called Myth Mapping. We had asked the group to make a mask to illustrate a story that was of importance to them. They began the mask in August and finished it in October 2011. Over the final two days of our unit, we had a series of presentations of the stories together with a performance where the participants wore their masks. I included my own presentation of the story of White Cocky and native title. When I began my White Cocky mask I had no idea that I would develop it in this way. But reading the way in which both federal and state



governments, together with the legal profession, dealt with Aboriginal requests for native title left me angry.

The mask of White Cocky took on a new persona as I covered it in “feathers” cut from the racist book that I had used previously. White Cocky became a sinister image representing the problematical side of native title that many people in our society do not want to face. The performance led me to ask: “What is so revolutionary about the *Mabo* decision that many people across Australia, including State and Federal governments, sought to nullify its power to affect change?” One answer to this question is that issues of racism were prevalent in Australia even in recent decades. In exploring questions of being at the intersection of these two cultures, and certainly being an ally, I would need to address my own racism.



Figure 37: Two laws of the land

#### 4.10 Two Laws

On the first night in Derby after I returned from Yalun, I had the dream of two rooms and the yapping dog. One meaning of the dream is it noted the change from the silence and serenity of the inland to the more noisy environment at Derby. At another level, however, the dream touches on the difference between Aboriginal Law and native title. Aboriginal Law is transmitted through

words together with dance and imagery. *Whitefella* law (including native title) is like a yapping dog in contrast to Aboriginal Law. Native title sessions rely on thousands of pages of words to deliver their judgements. They are complex and often obtuse.

Lisa Strelein (2009) summarises the intent of native title as both to recognise and to protect the interests of Indigenous people (p. 126). This is a commendable aim, except for the long history of rhetoric concerning the protection of Aboriginal people often being disingenuous. Strelein notes that native title is like a fault line, at the intersection of two entirely different systems of law. The analogy of fault lines implies a grating or collision between the tectonic plates, in this case two cultures. Native title implies that the two systems cooperate and that the interests of Indigenous people are protected by this long-term cooperation. But is this true? As Strelein argues, “Despite the court’s insistence, it is false to say that native title is not a creature of common law” and that this in turn is burdened by the Crown’s sovereignty (p. 126). This burden implies that common law, and the outworking of government, will take precedence over the rights and interests of Indigenous people.

The weakness of native title as a frail intersection between two systems of law was evident to me when I tried to produce a video for Janet to record the determination. I had combined my visuals of the determination process together with a sound recording of the court process. I overlaid the video images of the smoking and dances with soundtrack from the court determination. I later realised that I was bringing together two laws and two states of being. Although the Australian legal process has tried to create space for Aboriginal Law, this cannot be done without diminishing Aboriginal Law or changing the spirit of common law which is actually not “common”. I am sure that Mowaljarlai and other Aboriginal Elders would have preferred a more just and equitable recognition of their law than being “fitted into” Western common law and its notion of native title.

Fiona McAllan (2013) notes that Derrida asks two fundamental questions as he interrogates law in Western culture: “Is justice reducible to law?” and “Who has the right to make law?” (p. 170). As I reflect on these questions, it is obvious that justice has not been served by the creation of native title. Indeed, such title seems yet another defence mechanism or auto-immunity protecting the State from having to negotiate the more difficult claim, elaborated by Deborah Bird Rose, that “place ascribed itself into peoples, rather than peoples assuming illusory notions of power domination in and over their inter-entity relations” (Bird Rose cited in McAllan, 2013, p. 178).

The actual determination at Yalun was paradoxical and evidence of this tension between the systems of law. On the one hand, the Federal Court had shown respect in meeting on *Worrorra* land. This enabled the people to host the non-Indigenous guests and exercise their Law in relationship to land and culture. I was moved when the guests walked through the smoke and observed the dancing, an expression of the Law. However, in reviewing my recording of the Judge's speech at Yalun, I am aware that there was no formal statement of recognition or apology for the consequences of colonialism which had earlier shifted the *Worrorra* people from their traditional lands. Is this an example of our auto-immunity? When I placed the recording of the Court determination together with that of the earlier smoking and dances, I noticed the great distance between these legal structures. This tension is very real in Donny's response, as he deals with a contradiction in the meaning of ownership. He has right to land, but this right is limited.

One of the hidden aspects of Western law is that its value base is radically different from that of Aboriginal Law. The use (and misuse) of land is judged by a series of criteria based on ownership and relationships among competing interests. Governments give high priority to issues such as economic development, particularly in WA, where the government is intent on developing the resources in its far north. Such priority takes precedence over relationships among people, and little regard is given to the breakdown of community in response to their often aggressive tactics. The James Price Point conflict is a perfect example of this, for it split Aboriginal families across the Kimberley. This conflict appeared to be a repeat of Noonkanbah's controversy over proposed oil drilling several decades earlier (Kolig, 1987).

#### **4.11 For the future**

The words "ally" and "alliance" indicate the long term aspect of the struggle for land rights. I have sought to place the *Worrorra*'s native title determination within a longer time frame noting the work of the Uniting Church in assisting the people as allies. Our work is not over, for native title is complex, the weakest of common law titles and subject to changes in government and community thinking. The people rightly fear the word "extinguish", noting that governments are capable of giving and then later taking back.

*Ngarinyin* Elder Paddy Neowarra (1997) forcefully states the implications of such extinguishment. It really means "killing off our chances to survive as a living culture, as a people, as participants in the future of Australia. It means extinguishing our birthright and meaning, so that we cannot thrive or survive in this life" (para.15). The threat of extinguishment suggests that white law can over-ride Aboriginal Law. When these laws are in conflict, precedence is often given to the legal system of the dominant culture, in this case common law. In 1986 the Australian

Law Reform Commission presented a comprehensive report on this issue of the relationship between customary Law and Australian law (Australia, 1986). The report explored questions such as “what it is that is being recognized, and what are the implications of that recognition?” Customary Law is neither systematic nor consistent and perhaps this arises from its relationship with unique places and the related cultures. There is no formal hierarchy of government as in the Western sense. The Commission’s recommendations began with a statement of principles including the recognition that “The scope for recognition of Aboriginal customary Laws through common law rules for the recognition of local custom or communal native title is very limited” (para 62-3), and is inadequate to deal with the questions raised by the Commission’s Terms of Reference” (para 63).

Notwithstanding the uncertainty of native title, the *Ngarinyin* people are engaging in the long term process of reconnecting to their traditional lands. A major task of the Boab Network and the Uniting Church generally is to affirm and assist this long term connection with traditional lands. This is why we continued to support Elders such as Eddie Bear as they seek to return to their lands (chapter 3 and 6). We are called to be allies in an informal alliance which has continued for many decades. Return to land and land rights is more than a nicety it is the means to preserve and maintain the extraordinary culture and heritage of the Kimberley Aboriginal people.



## Chapter 5

### Relational *being* on the land



Figure 38: Black and white cocky in collaboration

## 5.1 Introduction

In chapters 3 and 4, I described what I learnt about what it meant to be a guest and ally as we non-Indigenous people walked alongside our Aboriginal friends as they struggled for land rights and to return to their traditional lands. The role of guest underpinned all of my subsequent actions and understanding of what collaboration might mean. The role of ally enlarged my understanding of what collaboration might mean. In this chapter I explore what it means to walk alongside and empathically be with the people in a collaborative relationship on lands which belong to other language groups (non-traditional).

In October 2011, members of the Boab Network collaborated with staff from the Mowanjum Arts Centre to create an artist/children's camp on non-traditional lands at Poulton Pool. Symbolic of such collaboration is the image of the black and white cocky in dialogue. This image of two cockies in equal relationship illustrates a collaborative relationship: an equal partnership in which both parties are in dialogue. This differs from other relationships in which the parties do not meet in an equal power relationship, such as guests in a host/guest relationship on journeys to Majaddin (chapter 3) and Yalun (chapter 4). The Poulton Pool collaboration led to significant insights that not only challenged our ontological presuppositions, but also the very meaning of collaboration. I argue that we were taught the importance of empathically relating to land and community, which placed emphasis on the *being* and not the doing. Aboriginal people listen and emotionally relate to the land rather than objectively as is a Western response.

The trip to Poulton Pool was a compromise. We had intended to organise a trip to a remote part of the Kimberley, but this did not eventuate. Instead, the Mowanjum Arts Centre invited the Boab Network to join in a collaborative venture nearer to Mowanjum. Together, we organised a combination artists and children's camp at a beautiful place on the May River. The advantage of this journey would be its proximity to Mowanjum, some sixty kilometres down the Gibb River Road. The disadvantage was that it would not have the same draw for the Mowanjum people as trips to traditional land involving the Boab Network: to Majaddin in 2010 or Yalun in 2009. The Poulton Pool trip was intended to support Mowanjum artists as they painted on country. We combined this objective with the Boab Network's aim of providing a holiday program for children. Forty adults and children from a number of families took part in collaboration with three staff from the Arts Centre (an Aboriginal couple and a non-Indigenous arts facilitator together with three people from the Boab Network). We spent four days at Poulton Pool with a mixture of activities including fishing, swimming, supporting art activities and generally being with the people and the land. Joanna Wilkie (Jo) from the Mowanjum Arts Centre

set up the arts tent and carefully ordered the paints and the canvases. Lee-Anne Burnett organised the food while I videoed various aspects of the camp and generally spent time with the people.

This journey did not involve traditional culture in the same sense as Majaddin, for there were no cave sites and therefore no need for the protocols around such visits. However, I found the experience equally challenging because I tend to be over-active in my work and relationship with the people of Mowanjum. This trip led me to understand the necessity of being in a good relationship with the people and the country as a precondition to action. It also reinforced the importance of letting go of those Western constructs such as the need for objectives, clean cut organisation and a set of expected outcomes.

Place/land for Aboriginal people has a primary effect on relating, and thus on collaboration. In this chapter, I further explore the impact of land on our collaboration. In this respect, participants from the Boab Network learnt to be with the people on their land empathically, and thus to engage in non-action as distinct from intentional action. Being on land is to enter a place of unknowing where, to use the words of Robert Bosnak (2009), we know in an unknowing kind of way. Bosnak speaks of experiences out bush which are beyond language and knowing in the academic sense. To relate empathically to the people and to the land is to enter this experience of unknowing. I was taught to move beyond a work centred focus: to listen deeply to the people and the land, not knowing where this might lead.

What then of my fundamental question: What does trans-cultural collaboration mean in the context of being *up-country*? The trip had been organised as collaboration between the Arts Centre and the Boab Network. However, it brought people together for different reasons. Jo shared from the perspective of the Arts Centre:

My objective was to take out artists, the painters. The artwork on the walls after the festival are blank so the intention was to go out there on an art camp for the adults basically and work in conjunction with you guys at the same time. Because the artists bring along all the kids. The grandparents have the grandchildren and you guys have extended family with kids and all of that so, it is very difficult to take out just artists with no children. So that comes as part of the territory (Recorded conversation, 9 July 2013).

Although the camp was collaborative, the word collaboration again seems inadequate to convey the depth and quality of what we experienced at Poulton Pool. The word collaborate assumes shared work and activity. Yet we were being challenged to let go of a work focus and to

experience what it meant to be with the people on the land. The shared experience at Poulton Pool was not a tourist trip, and it was far more than a collaborative exercise. To focus on collaboration with Aboriginal people might be yet another way of controlling the situation: seeking to pull them into a non-Indigenous way of thinking. At Poulton Pool we were being taught important lessons that would undergird our future actions. I was being taught what it meant to be on the land empathically (section 5.2), which included the importance of place (sections 5.3-5.5) and a new understanding and appreciation of time (section 5.6).



Figure 39: Being at Poulton Pool

In sections 5.7-5.11 I offer a series of vignettes to describe some of the encounters with the people at Poulton Pool. These are by no means comprehensive, as so much occurred in this short time with the people. They serve, however, as examples of how our being “empathically” with the people affected us in a significant way. We seek to understand each other, but within this relationship, to understand the cultural underpinnings of such relating. Helen Verran (2007), for example, speaks of “ontics”, which is a way “of rendering our metaphysical commitments visible, often by telling stories, but also in other sorts of embodied performance” (p. 36). Our actions, whether intentional or not, express our values and what we deem to be important. Thus change can occur naturally as we act out our values in different ways to what might be expected or anticipated. These vignettes are a form of ontics – performances through enacted experience in which the underlying metaphysical commitments, the significant values and life assumptions are

made visible. This in turn offers the possibility of new understandings and changes in our behaviour. Goricanec (2009) refers to Verran and states that “ontics” is “content to be incomplete and accepting and valuing vagueness” (p. 223). Thus my intent in presenting these vignettes is not to present a structure of relating, but to point to learning possibilities.

## 5.2 Empathically being on land

In the camp at Poulton Pool we learnt how to be with the people in a creative and transformative way consistent with their understanding of what it means to relate to the lands and to each other. We were learning the importance of empathically relating with the feelings of the people for their country and their way of being on land. In this sense I was engaging in a relational ontology which assumes “that knowers are social beings who cannot be separated from what is known” and of course the knower’s own body which is one “bodymind” (Thayer-bacon, 2000, p. 135). Such ontology deconstructs my learnt modes of relating to land, nature and sustainability, challenging my Western cultural, philosophical and spiritual upbringing. Empathy is critical to this ontology. Such a relational framework underlies Indigenous research methodology such as that proposed by Martin (2003).

A basic definition of empathy is: “The ability to imagine oneself in the position of another person and to be able to understand how another person is feeling” (John Harris & Vicky White, 2013, p. 189). I would extend this definition to that of being open to another person’s world view generally and also to feel for the land and the creatures of the land. I also understand social empathy to incorporate being open to other people’s perceptions and experiences of life situations. This in turn offers insight into structural inequalities and disparities (Segal, 2011), particularly with regard to Aboriginal communities (Gair, 2013). Such a view supports my concern for assisting the Mowanjum community to return to land as they seek to overcome their social disempowerment and inequality.

Jeremy Rifkin (2010) summarises extensive research into the nature of empathy in a video clip involving spoken/written word and imagery. He states that empathy is our ability to sense the joy and suffering of another. This ability is “soft-wired” into us through what are called mirror neurons.<sup>1</sup> When a person observes another who is demonstrably angry or sad, the same neurons light up in the observer as in the one who first experiences the sentiment. Rifkin argues that our primal drive is to belong rather than to be aggressive. He speaks of mature empathy which arises

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<sup>1</sup> Rifkin uses the term soft-wired to describe temporary brain processes that do not create a permanent change.

through the discovery of our own sense of self. A person is able to feel his or her vulnerability and that of other people. Empathy is grounded in the awareness of our mortality and the celebration of life, thus fuelling our compassion for others. As Rifkin (2009) states, empathy “is the ability to experience another’s struggle as one’s own and is only possible if one is aware of the fragility of their existence and the mortality of their being” (p. 162). I would add awareness of one’s own fragile existence and mortality. Rifkin then writes of an empathic civilisation where dividing boundaries such as race, gender and religion are broken down and people relate globally with compassion and understanding. He suggests that changes in human consciousness may make this possible. Such empathy which leads to cooperation rather than competition can be a reason for optimism and hope. It is not my purpose to critique Rifkin’s (2009) work in detail; however, its message is that empathy offers the possibility of trans-cultural connection and understanding as well as the basis of relating to the land and creatures of the land.

It is not my intention to review the extensive research on empathy; rather, I propose to view it through a phenomenological perspective. Victor Gallese (2001) writes that “According to Husserl, what makes the behaviour of other agents intelligible is the fact that their body is experienced not as material object (Körper), but as something alive (Leib), something analogous to our own experienced acting body” (p. 43). Gallese then states that Edith Stein argues that this is not a simple grasp of the others’ feelings, but through the notion of similarity one experiences the other like oneself. This reveals a paradox, for Aboriginal and other peoples who are both similar and different, particularly in their relationship with land. Matthew Ratcliffe (2012) notes Stein’s (1989) discussion of empathy, which acknowledges that empathy is a two sided phenomenon. We experience feelings in ourselves that announce or resonate with feelings in the other person. It is not a matter of projecting our feelings onto the other person. We can never experience the other’s joy or sadness, but can infer such feelings by what we experience in ourselves. In the case of the following experiences of land, I cannot feel exactly what my Mowanjum friends feel with regard to land, but I have the capacity to make my own emotional response.

As Ratcliffe (2012) explains, the feelings are only part of the story; we also require a cognitive input: “For example, we might perceive that someone is angry, but the content of our empathetic perception does not include an understanding of why she is angry” (p. 476). Ratcliffe further defines this stance as:

- (i) recognition of an aspect of experience that our everyday concerns presuppose;
- (ii) a commitment to reflect upon it; and

(iii) at least some appreciation of what the relevant phenomenological achievement consists of—in terms of a space of possibilities, noting that much of the same insight could be communicated in various other ways too (p. 486).

In other words, Ratcliffe writes for those who do not share a common cultural and philosophical understanding and this would be true for sharing with Aboriginal people. Through empathy we seek to explore other possibilities of perceiving and understanding a common event as in (i) above. I bring a commitment to reflect on this difference (ii) and with the help of conversations, to see other possibilities which extend my ability to empathise with the other. However, Ratcliffe takes the sceptical view that it is not possible to enter into another's modal space of which one has no direct experience (p. 487). Perhaps this remains the tension in being open to another's world when it is significantly different from one's own. In such a case, it is being open and receptive to feelings and understandings which may be alien even incomprehensible.

Two recent researchers – Clare Land and Carol Birrell approach empathy with Aboriginal people and the land in different ways. Their contrasting approaches have relevance to my work as they offer two different forms of an empathic stance. Land (2012) is concerned with collaborations from the perspective of justice and solidarity with those who struggle to regain their lands. Her work is naturally empathic. Taking a political approach, she writes of what it means for non-Indigenous activists to be in solidarity with the Indigenous struggles of southeastern Australia. Her thesis is relevant in the light of my journey to Yalun and the issue of what it means to take a stand with the Mowanjumb people as they fight for their land rights and struggle to retain their connection with the land. She undertook her research in the wake of the controversial Northern Territory Emergency Response (the Intervention). One of her central questions is: “How might non-Indigenous people work to improve relationships with Indigenous people in the solidarity context?” (p. 16). In the course of answering this question, she considers the issue of being “white” in light of a long history of colonialism. Fundamental to this issue is the matter of the Indigenous/non-Indigenous difference. On the one hand it reflects colonialist thinking that used Indigenous/non-Indigenous differences as justification for oppression, but on the other the differences reflect “a material, historical reality (a ‘social fact’) for many people” (p. 69). Her approach seeks to balance critical self-reflection with a commitment to action (p. 126). She participates in a forum organised to “gather together knowledge around the practices of solidarity”. Land (2011), in reflection with others, assumed that the “idea of colonisation by individuals, institutions and the state remains” and that this needs de-activation along with an interrogation of the practices of solidarity (p. 42). She quotes Jen Margaret in arguing for an



understanding of the colonial mindset while supporting the struggles of those with whom one is in alliance (p. 127). Land explores two sides of the relationship: Aboriginal relationship and struggle for land and her relationship with Aboriginal people. I would add a third: discovering my own empathy for the land.



Figure 40: Waiting on the land

Birrell (2006) in contrast to Land does not intend to act in political solidarity with Aboriginal people as they engage land. Rather, she demonstrates what it means to nurture non-Indigenous empathy with the land. She asks whether there is “a new sensibility that connects us with place, more informed by Indigenous ways of being” (p. 6). She answers this question by exploring both Aboriginal relationships with land, as well as her relationship with land while also describing her long term association (collaboration) with Aboriginal Elders. Fundamentally Birrell argues that the connection and communication which non-Indigenous people have lost with nature can be regained with the help of Aboriginal wisdom mediated by particular Aboriginal Elders. She applies a metaphor gleaned from this relationship, namely the Yolngu concept of *ganma* – the meeting of the freshwater and the salt waters. She notes: “The ganma metaphor allows me to ‘hover’ between the space of the Indigenous world and that of the Western world, and to view it as a place of possibilities, a place of negotiation, a place of exchange, a place of complexity” (p. 21). This metaphor is particularly apt for my work, for I too seek to enter that place in-between two cultures. Birrell highlights the fact that the barramundi must make necessary adjustments when moving between fresh and salt water and their different environments. I agree



and ask what kinds of adjustment need to be made when spending time at Poulton Pool in the company of our Mowanjum friends.

Birrell seeks to listen to place through empathy with Aboriginal wisdom and insight. Such an approach seems consistent with phenomenological approaches to land. Soren Larsen and Jay Johnson (2012) similarly speak of an embodied awareness of place which is open to wonder and compassion. They speak of affinity politics in which peoples with diverse backgrounds collaborate to take political action concerning land because of their mutual affinity with the land. Such affinity is called forth by the qualities experienced in the land which include “its shimmering into infinitely new and unpredictable ways of disclosure” and that dependence on the land brought into being by compassion for the land and its creatures (p. 639). Such a phenomenology of place invites new possibilities and ways of responding to the land and the people who live in relationship with the land. In this respect, I seek to empathise with Aboriginal people as they engage the land and learn new ways of being and relating to the land.

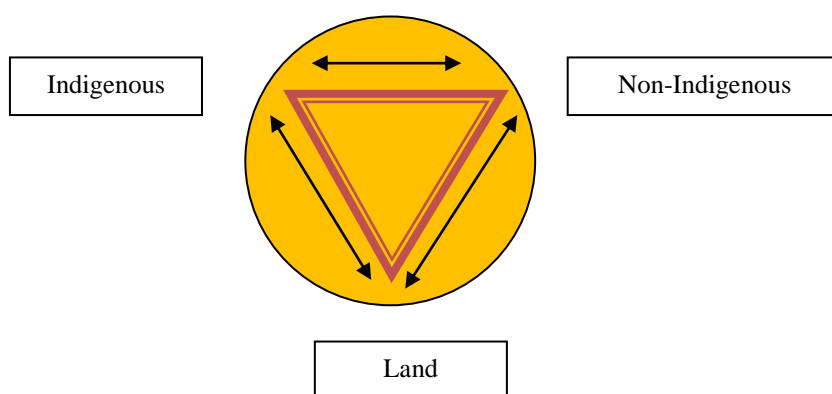


Figure 41: A three way empathy –among Indigenous/non-Indigenous, Indigenous and the land, non-Indigenous and the land

The above diagram illustrates the three way relating on Aboriginal land. The people of Mowanjum have a unique relationship with the land and in a sense this is fundamental to a collaborative relationship. There is a second relating: namely between those who are Indigenous and those who are non-Indigenous.<sup>2</sup> This relating requires careful nurturing and can open the door to a new understanding and relationship with land. In this respect, I and other non-Indigenous people also seek an intimate relating to the land, particularly when we go up country. However, as

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<sup>2</sup> I have used the contrast between the active *gerund* (the *present participle* of the verb) *relating* and the crystallised noun *relationship* to indicate the tension between the people’s ongoing relating to the land, and their formal relationship which is constant and enduring.

the following conversation illustrates, many Mowanjum people have a unique feeling for the land arising from their ancestral roots. It is the basis of their existence, which goes back into the ancient past, for millennia.

### 5.3 A Mowanjum Elder's view of land and place

I asked Aboriginal artist and chair of the Arts Centre's council, Kirsty Burgu, what she thought about land and place. Kirsty said that it was going back to their roots:

You know where our ancestors walked and what they did. Like, we follow in their steps. When we go out we go fishing, go hunting, you know, and the places, like they went, we went. You know. So, if you say for *Yalun* side, we started going there when I was a teenager. We went out there and that's where my mum took us out there, all the time that we were going to our dad's side, in the *Ngarinyin* area. Mum wanted us to go to her area (Recorded conversation, 11 October 2011).

Kirsty spoke about her dad's origins at *Pantijan* and then stated that "Dad used to tell us 'We want you to go back to your country, you know, and learn about your country because the land is more precious than anything. When you have no land, you have nothing'". I noted the importance of the purchase of the *Pantijan* lease in chapter 4. This moment was obviously a treasured memory and continued to influence the present. I then asked Kirsty if the Mowanjum children appreciate this message. She replied that the people were following a different way now:

Like town way, you know. But when they go out that is the time for them to learn, you know. They go out bush and learn thing, that's a good time... Like when I was smaller mum and dad used to take us everywhere you know. We never used to stay in the camp. We all went out camping out and hunting, and fishing, you know, we never stayed around the house. And that memory kept in my mind, so that I want to do it for these kids now. To take them out, you know. And enjoy what I enjoyed.

I told Kirsty that my thesis was about affirming the importance of land. She agreed, saying, "I think that it is more thing than gold. It is more precious than gold or diamonds. Once your land is taken away from you, you are just lost". This statement reminded me why many of the young people feel lost. Kirsty agreed:

I think so, because it seems like there is nothing. Mowanjum is not our country. This is somebody else's country. All our country is everywhere else, you know. So, I think when they brought the people here, you know, they thought it was going to be good

for everyone, but it turned out that the town was close with its alcohol. But when they were out there they did everything. They walked around, tracking, fishing and when they came here, they all got sick. You know and the feed that we eat now makes us sick.

I said that Maizie McKenzie (1969) had written that the people were leaving their own milk and honey land and coming into exile (p. 3). Kirsty agreed: “We are in exile. We are prisoners of diabetes, smoking problems, like you know, alcohol problem, fighting, because it is right near town you know. And that is where everything happens. But when they are out at bush you see the change, in the kids as well”.

The land is obviously very important for Kirsty. Anthropologist and historian Minoru Hokari (2011) writes of the importance of land to the Gurindji, an Aboriginal clan in Northern Territory east of the Kimberley. He writes his understanding that the Gurindji have of place: “This earth - or, in a sense, ‘place’ is neither a conceptual nor a non-organic space in which every being exists and lives. Instead place is the origin, cause and reason of every life and its existence” (p. 96). This primal cause is eloquently expressed in Kevin Glover’s (2009) forward to a collection of North American Indian writing on the importance of land:

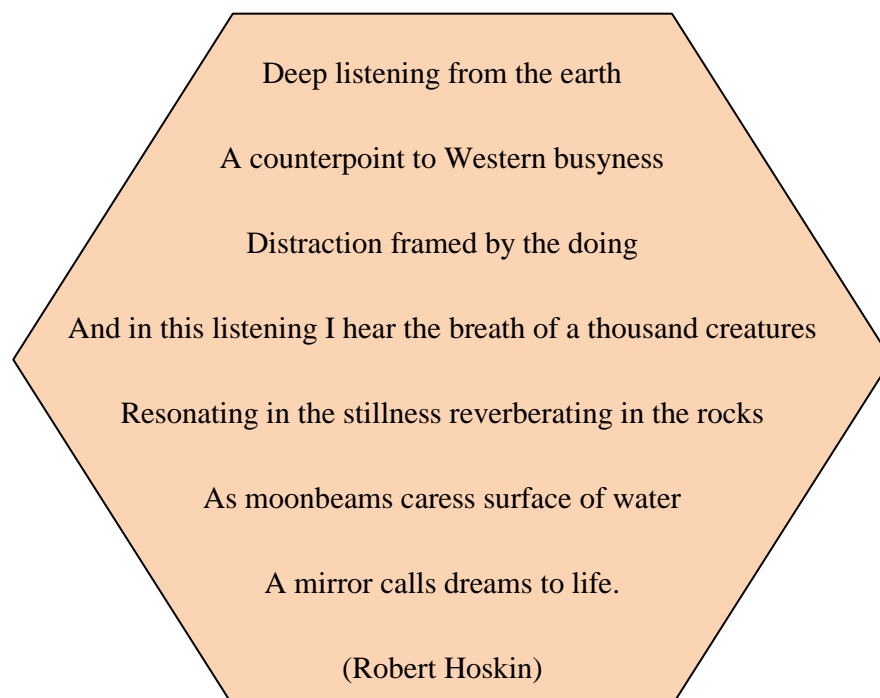
Like all mothers, Mother Earth is the ultimate giver. She reveals her beauty in countless variations, from wetlands and meadows to rain forests and deserts. Like any good mother she does many things at the same time and does them all well. She nurtures us with food crops, heals us with medicinal plants, and sustains us with other natural resources. (p. xi)

Hokari’s conclusion, Kirsty’s statements and Glover’s words illustrate the basis of empathy, to which Rifkin refers to as a primal instinct to belong. Land thus becomes a focus of this empathic feeling. My time at Poulton Pool was an opportunity both to experience this feeling and to hear it from others.

## **5.4 Being on the land**

I can only catch a glimpse of how important the land is to Mowanjum people. However, I began to relate to the land empathically after several days at Poulton Pool. By the third day I noted that waking up in the Kimberley is an extraordinary experience. I was conscious of the sun rising over the pools of water. As it did, I would see the water rippling as the fish became active. Overhead, birds of prey circled hoping for a catch. I spent the first day tired but enjoying the

experience of being in the land. The children were playing in the river, as they would continue to do over the next few days. Later, I walked around to where Gordon and Gabby were fishing in the deeper part of the river, near to where the saltwater crocodiles were assumed to be resting. On the way, one of the children asked me to rescue his net. It had been snagged on a rock. The child was frightened of going too near the crocodile. I tried to loosen it, lost balance and fell in. Fortunately the croc was asleep. Gordon and Gabby had caught barramundi and were keen for me to try it fresh from the coals. They filmed me enjoying this delicacy, the first of many to come. They took great pleasure in watching me eat the fish, particularly as I expressed my delight. I was being taught how to be with the land!



By the end of the week I was sinking into the land. I had the realisation that I could rest in the land and did not need to be protected from the land. I had always put up a tent when I stayed out in the Kimberley, so that creepy crawlies such as snakes would leave me alone. Now, in this land, I took a different approach and felt very safe. I would simply be in the land and lay upon it open to whatever. I did suffer some grief, for the mosquitoes came in full force. It was hot so that I did not have any shirt on me. But, with time and patience, I learnt to deal with these, not that I slept well. I was awake early and very conscious of the stars and moon moving above me. Or was it the earth moving? I was also beginning to be with the land meditatively, to be aware of the birds of prey looking for their early morning meals, to notice the rays of the sun touching the dark forms and inviting them into the light.

I had a conversation with Ross at the end of the week, reflecting on our experiences of being on the land. I spoke with him about the camp to catch up with my own feelings and reaction to the past week. I began by saying that some days were emotionally overpowering. He asked me why and I replied that I was learning to let go and to create a space for things to happen. Ross summed up my words: “You know, the relaxation, the letting go creates the space for something to come into it and happen” (Recorded conversation, 6 October 2011). I said that this week was an incredible letting go. I gave up everything. I did not want to interview anyone, or worry about taking photos, or drawing or whatever; all I wanted to do was just to be. Ross responded, “And that allows consciousness of things for you to feel and to see and have a spiritual connection with or something, maybe that is the empty space, that you need for that to flower”. These words indicate that I was learning two important lessons from being at Poulton Pool. I was learning the importance of place (section 5.5) and the confluence of time (section 5.6), namely that time is inseparably linked to place and the relations that occur in a particular place.

## **5.5 The Importance of place**

Through my journeys with the Mowanjam people I have come to realise their intimate and necessary connection between self and place, particularly as they have been displaced from their traditional lands. Brian Treanor (2011) summarises Edward Casey’s theories of the primacy of place. He writes that such an emphasis on land presents a challenge to Western philosophy which, as Casey argues, has placed more emphasis on other concepts such as time and space (p. 51). Indeed, through Western technology, “scientific objectivity, technical efficiency and economic profitability” anyone can relate to the land “without the mediation of any kind of culture” (Stephen Muecke, 2004, p. 14). However, Casey (2001) goes further, arguing that “there is no place without a self and no self without a place” (p. 684). He then gives concrete examples of work to illustrate that place and self are totally enmeshed. However, the linking of self to place is pertinent for Aboriginal communities, particularly as they engage in traditional places such as Majaddin.

When we non-Indigenous people journey with Aboriginal people, we cross a threshold to move from one way of being to another. In terms of Casey’s argument, this threshold brings the community to their place and their unique relationship between self (their story, culture, way of being) and this physical place called Majaddin. We who are non-Indigenous people are also invited to make a crossing and to relate to this place. This crossing is more than a physical crossing; it is a crossing from one philosophical basis where self is detached from matter and place, to that where self is intimately attached to place. This is radically different to making such a

crossing as a tourist, where there is neither expectation nor invitation to relate to a particular place as other than foreign.

Casey draws from Pierre Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* to suggest that this is the middle term between place and self – “in particular between the lived place and the geographical self” (p. 686). What lies between those features experienced in a particular place affects one's future relationship with other places. History is thus merged with geography and intimately attached to it, which again is very true for the Mowanjum people as they experience their traditional places. In contrast, we can experience a desiccation of both self and place, where the connection is diminished or non-existent. Casey writes, “We are then left with the sobering prospect of a redoubled loss- loss of place, loss of self” (p. 687). This is the danger faced by new generations of the Mowanjum community, where children, youth and adults occupy that space between two worlds. They are threatened by their loss of connection to the places of story and meaning so vital for their ongoing notion of self.

One of Casey's most important insights concerns the distinction between space and place. He argues that even in a vast landscape, it will never become space but “remains a composition of places” (p. 689). Again, this is true for the Kimberley where every place has its story and connection with those who cared for and nurtured that place. It is a place world, not a universal space which can be generalised. Being at Poulton Pool, we non-Indigenous people who have been taught detachment and a dichotomy between mind/body, spirit/place were given a remarkable opportunity to engage in the landscape and the story attached to a particular place. The land for Aboriginal people is alive, enriched by story and filled with the presence of creatures and spirits. Such an understanding challenges a Western approach which sees the land as inert, to be manipulated and destroyed at will. Anthropologist Tony Redmond (2001) states that for the *Ngarinyin* people the land is neither static nor stable; it vibrates, shudders, moves or needs to be restrained. This land is more like a living organism which generates life in response to the people's care and responsibility. It is a full place – not an empty place – full of story, art, animals and plants all intimately related to the community, not to mention the spirits that pervade the consciousness of the community as they encounter their traditional places.

## 5.6 The confluence of time

The second major learning from Poulton Pool concerns time. I live and work in a time conscious society. Indeed, my research and eventual thesis is time dependent. I am limited by time restraints both in my research and in the production of my final thesis. As I seek to empathise with the people of Mowanjum *up-country*, I am challenged to adopt a new appreciation of time and the

time-less. I have been a person ruled by time, in my working life and now in my relationship with the people of Mowanjum. I have been conscious of time independent of place. I have wanted to achieve things in my time or within some predetermined time scale. This is not the Aboriginal way and it becomes very evident on land. Kirsty Burgu discussed the difference between life out bush and life at Mowanjum. She spoke of a different approach to time. Time follows from the movement of the sun out bush, while in Mowanjum it is haphazard. Life follows a natural rhythm in synchronicity with the rhythms of day and night and the seasons that are taking place in the land. For example, Kirsty said:

But as soon as sun sets we have to have everything ready, bed ready, *mangarri* (food) ready. And eat before the sun sets but when we are here (in Mowanjum) we eat any old time. But while you are there we have centipedes that come round, ants, so that you need to tidy that area where you eat and thing you know so that you have to cook early part and eat it before the sun sets (Recorded conversation, 11 October 2011).

I asked Kirsty if we were living a different kind of time *up-country*. She replied:

Yes we were. (laughs) That's why at night, we were just relaxing. About seven. We were just laughing. I was just drinking tea every minute. That's the only thing. But you notice in the bush, for me, when I am here I get up any old time. I just get up and I just sleep in and I get up late and I go to bed late here. But when I am in bush it's different like, maybe the smell, maybe not inside walls, you know. Like inside, like blocking everything out. Well when I was taken I got up early daybreak before the sun, and I was making tea, eating breakfast you know. By night-time we had supper early, bed was made, then all the kids, when they are here they don't go to sleep, but out here they go to bed early. You heard all the noise for a while and then all quiet. And we had no clock, or watch to look at and we didn't know what time it was. We got to sleep early.

Clearly the place and its natural rhythms determines the time, rather than some external concept of time independent of the place. This is probably why people like Kirsty feel so disoriented at Mowanjum, which is not their traditional country. They have not come fully into a Western concept of time and miss that sense of time which is associated with the land. I was beginning to move into a different rhythm out bush. I told Kirsty that I loved that moment of getting up around daybreak and getting into the routine and feeling the sun rise. Kirsty also speaks of the healing nature of the bush.

Because when I am here at home I hardly see the sun, like most of the day when I am asleep and I am usually *thing* and it sort of make me angry, you know. So by going out bush it helps me to enjoy the day and then I go to sleep early. You know. So you feel more better you know when I was here I had a lot of pains in my back. But out there the pain just went. And when I come back the pain come back with me. (laughs)

Tony Swain (1993) argues that Aboriginal people have a rhythmic view of time; Aboriginal people “speak neither of lines or cycles of time” (p. 18). Rather, Swain argues that they operate from an understanding of *rhythmic event*. In other words, there is nothing beyond the events themselves – only those events occur and they can observe some rhythm. Such rhythms are linked not through time, but through place. As Swain argues, “Ancestral Abiding Events and rhythmic life events are co-joined quite literally through place” (p. 23). Perhaps another way of stating this is that time is not independent of place as it seems to be for non-Indigenous people.

As I empathise with the people on land, I am challenged to enter a new relation to time. Kenneth Gergen (2009) speaks of confluence, as distinct from causality which is dominant in my Western tradition. Gergen contrasts the difference between a causal and confluent understanding of human action (pp. 49-59). He notes that the whole is the sum of the relations. A lighted match, for instance, does not cause the gasoline to combust, but “combustion is the achievement of a particular combination of flame and gasoline” (p. 55). As Kirsty has indicated, a whole set of relationships and actions take place at particular times of the day. Time is confluent with the physical environment and the needs of responding to that environment. I light a fire at the beginning of the day; I seek food or work in the early morning; I rest in the heat of the day; I play in the afternoon and tell stories at night. It is a natural confluence with the rhythms that occur around us. In this way I empathically relate to the land, rather than imposing my own routines and time restraints on this relationship.

## **5.7 Generative flux and the land**

The land, whether it be at Majaddin, Yalun or Poulton Pool, underlies the relating between Indigenous/non-Indigenous people. Such trans-cultural relating on land offers the opportunity to engage in new and unexpected behaviours and actions that have implications for transformation of life and attitudes. Such opportunities for “multi-being”, as Gergen (2009) calls it, extend the range of possibilities for relating (pp. 134-7). We learn through our prior relationships to think and act in diverse ways according to the context. Poulton Pool offered the opportunity to engage in new and unexpected behaviours arising from our relating to people of a different culture and empathic relationship with land; an in-between place.



Being on land is an ambling through an in-between space Following sociologist Jacques Boulet's (2012) lead, the following vignettes are like the crumbs left by "Hänsel and Gretel dropped at regular distances to find their way back home" after they are left in the forest (p. 1). When in this strange otherworld, we need to develop new ways of thinking, and such thinking is deeply dependent on relating rather than analytical thought. Boulet quotes John Heron, who states: "The point here is that we enact spirit as the reality of the in between, that is, of the relation between persons, between persons and other entities of all kinds, and between persons and their physical and subtle environment – in the situation where we are now..." (p. 4). Thus, in a sense, I wandered in this strange in-between space, clinging to a few stories as markers of what it meant when I was touched by "spirit" – those moments when people and/land met in a relationship which transcended their independence.

I found Boulet's characteristics of "real" relating helpful (pp. 31-32). They include acknowledging that of being in touch over time, of lingering, and savouring of relating, of a shared space characterised by the giving and receiving of gifts (reciprocity) and the realisation of our own self as we give ourselves within community. A beautiful moment!

Such engagement in this in-between place is what John Law (2004) calls a generative flux. He imagines such a place as a maelstrom "filled with currents, eddies, flows, vortices, unpredictable changes, storms and with moments of lull and calm" (p. 7). This metaphor is apt for the Kimberley, particularly in motoring by small boat around the coast. The point is that such a post-structuralist view assumes that there is no point looking for structures; rather, one should be aware of what is generated by this flux of meeting in the in-between place. My response to this perceived chaos or flux is to present a series of vignettes. Each illustrates a moment of meeting which led to insight and the possibility of new action or relating. An Elder demonstrates the way in which place has influenced her painting. Children are inspired to new creativity. Members of our group take responsibility for teaching children how to swim with surprising results. These examples demonstrate the wider aspects of our collaborative activity on land. They are also examples of what it means to be in empathy with the people and their land.

## Working together

*I went to video a senior Elder at work on her painting (she prefers to be unnamed). I soon found myself involved in her work. She complained to me that the paints were too thin. I said that I would fix it for her and went to get some paint from Jo. I did not want to intrude at this stage but act only as a messenger. Jo mixed acrylic into the paints and I returned with the mixed colour. It was not right. The Elder, like other artists, was very particular about the colour she used in her work. The colour had to accord with her memories of the caves. I made two trips before I felt I should intrude and suggested the right colour mix. This satisfied the Elder and put her at ease. (Personal Journal, October, 2011)*

This story illustrates the critical tension between the detached and observational approach of the video and being creatively involved. An empathic response naturally led me to be involved. I consciously became the servant to the senior Aboriginal women. I did this consciously, but in the past, missionaries, station managers or government officials automatically assumed that the women would be their servants, in some cases to the point of slavery. I was intentionally exploring a different way of action. In so doing, I began to see from the perspective of the senior Elder. In terms of ontics, this Elder had an underlying commitment to land. Her art had to relate to the land from which the image originated. This enduring place, to quote anthropologist Tony Swain (1993), is an abiding place in the Elder's memory and sense of being (p. 27). Finding the right colour expressed that deep relationship (her empathic response) to the cave which hosted the Wandjina at the centre of her focus and experience.

## A new breed of artist

The land had obviously impacted a senior Elder and affected her art. But it also had a surprising effect on the children's art. We were witnessing a new generation of artists, influenced by being on land with their Elders.

*The children surprised us with an explosion of art. They really got into painting. At first they did the child thing and created havoc in Jo's carefully prepared art tent. They were mixing colours in the paint and not cleaning brushes, but with a bit of organisation this settled. They produced some*

*lovely work. I found it very significant that they would proudly show off their work to us and wanted to be photographed with their piece as adults would have done. I helped one of the older children to splatter her work around her hands, which I found difficult because I was unused to doing this. But she seemed proud of the final piece. (Personal journal, October 2011)*

These children were watching their Elders, empathising with their feeling for the land. They then exhibited an explosion of creativity. This experience led me to take the initiative on the next trip to Majaddin and with the assistance of a visual artist, introducing children to new artistic possibilities. This creativity led to a very positive outcome.



Figure 42: Creative expression

Jo shared the ongoing story:

*I still remember the day that he sold his first painting for \$40. When young artists sold paintings they would keep the whole moneys. And his sister also sold a painting. When he came in I said to him, "Guess what I have for you?" I said that this is your first art pay. I said well done and he was so chuffed. So chuffed and I will never forget that day (Recorded conversation, 9 July 2013).*

## Rafts

Our collaborative effort created a safe place, where children could be creative. They had surprised us with their art; now they surprised in a different way: with ingenuity. They related to the river in a most creative way as the following story illustrates.

*We were impressed with the children at Poulton Pool. They spent a time swimming, fishing and even helping with the food. As we observed these Aboriginal children were very direct and free in their language and manner. They did not hide their needs in polite requests or even grace them with please and thank you. Given some latitude they became very creative. I was intrigued when one of them came to me and asked me to blow up a rubber mattress which could be used as a raft. I did it for her and before long the river was filled with bodies floating down from shallows on these blue mattresses. The children had followed my lead and blown up their own mattresses (Personal journal, October 2011).*

## 5.8 Ontics: being on land

The following four vignettes illustrate ontics as enacted performances, which enable new learning and ways of being together. These stories point beyond themselves to possibilities of breaking down cultural divisions and other barriers in trans-cultural relating. Mature empathy breaks down barriers such as race and cultural difference.

### The great equaliser

The land had its effect on us in many ways. Meeting at each other's camps and swimming together were simple moments transcending any cultural divisions. I spoke with Kirsty about the way in which people placed their sleeping mats/tents in camp. I had asked her whether we were working collaboratively. She answered with hesitation:

*I think so, (hesitates) we was all together. (I said, but you hesitate) No I was just thinking. We joined together, like there was no division there; only maybe in the camping area. You guys camped that side and we camped this side. But when it was morning time, everyone came to each other's camp, sitting down and talking, mixing, and when we went for a swim everyone went together (Recorded conversation, 11 October, 2011).*

Ross had also reminded me that he saw me slowly and carefully take the old woman down to the water with her walking frame. He added, "You looked very comfortable doing that". I

responded that it felt like being part of the family. This swim illustrated something much more than collaboration; it was a universal moment in which we shared in our common humanity. As Ross said, swimming together is the great equaliser: “You are in there together at the same level, the same environment, everything. You can’t even see your clothes, just heads sticking out” (Recorded conversation, 6 October 2011). To empathise with the people and their land is to join with them in playful activities in addition to the serious tasks.

## Swimming teachers

Living together on land meant that we were invited to take responsibility, one consequence of an empathic relating. The following story is an extraordinary example of collaboration. We were invited to take responsibility for the children in a dangerous situation, namely swimming at Poulton Pool, which had deep water along with shallows. Yet, Ross, Lee-Anne and Jo took this responsibility as an opportunity for the transformation of the children by teaching them to swim.

*Kirsty sent a message for me to look after her son of thirteen who could not swim. She feared that he would join the others and get into difficulties in the deeper water. I carefully responded, taking care to watch over him. Ross and Lee-Anne came to help but had a different idea. They taught the boys and other children how to swim. Indeed, the thirteen year old only needed a little nudge and he was into it, so much so that he came out of himself and began to teach the very young children too. I joined in and together we ensured that all the children were able to survive in the water. They are naturals and therefore do not need a lot of instruction. Jo, and later I, taught a young stocky boy about four. I gradually extended the distance between him and when he appeared to flounder encouraged him to relax. He heard what I was trying to say and easily swam the distance (Personal journal, October 2011). Jo shared that six months later she saw him swimming in the Derby swimming pool and asked him, “What did I teach you how to do?” He replied, “You taught me how to swim” (Recorded conversation, 9 July 2013).*

I asked Kirsty about the importance of our time with her son. I began by saying that I noticed that she has the older ones looking after the younger ones. Kirsty replied that her older siblings cared for her out bush and she in turn looked after her younger siblings. She then thanked

us saying: “You know, when you guys was there, it was a help, it was sort of like a community help” (Recorded conversation, 11 October 2011). I noted that it was a lovely feeling to be trusted with their kids and this meant that we had a sense of being part of the family. Kirsty agreed, saying that we were treated better than expected. Her son needed to be taught by someone other than his mother. Kirsty recounted a time when everyone looked after everyone else. She said, “You know, they don’t just look after themselves. We care for everyone. When you see it in the olden times, they used to look after each other, you know. Even now they are still doing that” (Recorded conversation, 11 October 2011). This care for each other seems critical when dealing with land, and its ever present dangers, and is an expression of empathy. My necessary priority became looking to the needs of those around me, rather than completing a research project.

Kirsty then told me that this swim had made a difference for her son. He opened up rather than talking to other children with his head down. She said, “You know he never talked to kids like that. Nothing, like being himself...It gave him courage and confidence”. This meant that we took the pressure off her; she no longer needed to worry about him swimming. She added, “and then when I knew that it was safe, I relaxed” (Recorded conversation, 11 October 2011).

### **The goanna hunt**

Sometimes the greatest learning about empathic relating can come when we make mistakes.

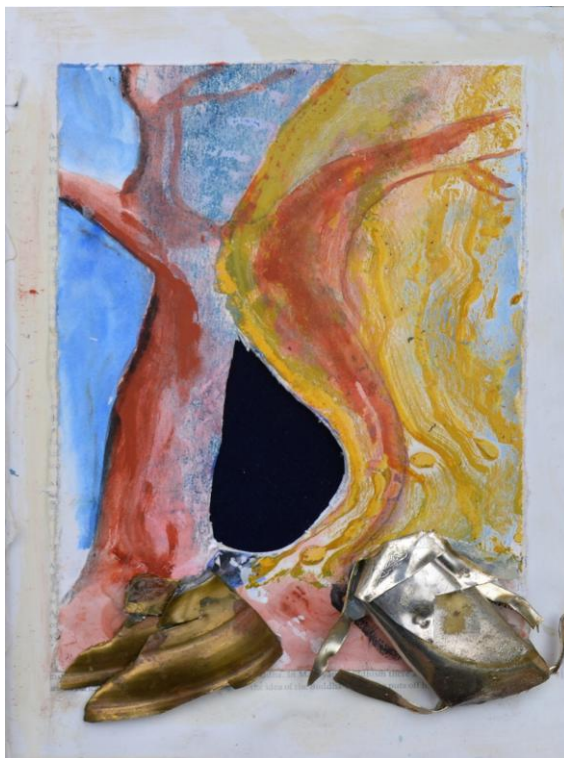
*I had been with Mickey when his son asked to go on a goanna hunt. I added that it would be great if we (meaning the non-Indigenous people) could also go. The next day, while in the middle of a conversation, Ross saw Mickey about to leave and rushed after the car and asked him to stop long enough for us to get our act together. The hunt turned into a long trip, as we travelled down the road nearby. We visited extraordinary water holes, looking for the tell tale goanna tracks which we could not find. What impressed me was the abundance of life, particularly flocks of wild birds. We sighted no goannas, but did not worry because it had been an important trip together (Personal journal, October 2011).*

I spoke with Mickey after the camp about the goanna hunt. I said that I noted his reticence to take us on the hunt. I had felt disappointed when they almost drove out without us. Mickey shared that his son wanted to take us hunting for goannas. Even though he knew this was the

wrong time of the year, Mickey agreed because he did not want to disappoint him. This was a valuable lesson. Aboriginal people rely on their intuitive feelings about what is right. My intuition told me that something was wrong, yet I ignored it and pressed ahead with the need to go on the hunt. As it turned out my intuitions were correct and I could have asked questions to check it out in a sensitive way. In other words, I was learning of empathy the hard way!

## Letting go

I was not the only one challenged by this experience at Poulton Pool. Jo for instance shared her change of attitude around the art. She had spent so much time and energy setting up the equipment only to see the paints in a chaotic state within a short time. She did not let this faze her but accepted the chaos and moved on. It was a valuable lesson! Jo shared her experience of the art:.



*Getting all the canvases pre cut, getting all of the paints, getting all the ochres in little containers and the binder and the brushes. Setting up the gazebo and the tables and having an area designated for the artists to do their painting. But the kids, they wanted to do it. They were right into it. I thought, let them have a go and they got right into it, and when I realised that I wasn't going to get a lot out of the artists I may as well ditch that idea and be OK with that and let it go (Recorded conversation, 9 July, 2013).*

Figure 43: Letting go

## 5.9 Empathy: relating and sharing on land

Jennifer Goricanec's (2009) thesis introduced me to the importance of Bruno Latour's work. She summarises Latour's understanding of "love talk", which concerns transforming relationships. This is not talk in the sexual sense but the sense of a loving commitment to relating

more akin to empathy. Such talk is applicable to that in-between space between people and the experience when relating to people of different cultures and understandings. As Goricanec notes: “‘Love-talks’ shift time and space – we are ‘closer’ when we are ‘in love’, further away when we aren’t. There is also a sense of timelessness. This transformation operates in the listener as well as in the speaker, performing, that is carrying into effect” (p. 225).

Ross shared the following story which illustrates these characteristics of relating.

One of the most beautiful moments on that whole trip was when I went over and sat with Rachel and Mickey and they pulled a fish in an alfoil wrap out of the fire which they had cooked and they had had enough. This was quite late in the evening it was dark. And certainly the kids had had their evening meal and were off running around playing and they were just sitting there by themselves. And they asked, “Would you like a bit?”. And I don’t think that we had had our evening meal by that stage so that I said, “Oh yes”. So we actually had two forks. Mickey had one and I had the other and we shared this fish and chatted while we ate the fish. And it was a very sharing time. Poking and eating out of this same fish. You know and he would break a bit off and have the bit and break another bit off and poke it over my side of the fish which I took to mean, that’s your bit – which I did and I picked it up and I ate it. And we shared this fish. Eventually, he lifted up the backbone, so that we could get at the bottom side, didn’t turn it over and pulled the bones off the top. And it was a very communal effort. And I asked him about the lung of the fish. And I said, can you eat that bit and it was nice. It was nice, fatty (Recorded conversation, 11 October, 2011).

In the above example, Ross, Rachel and Mickey shared the experience of a fish – a simple act, with profound consequences. In one sense this has nothing to do with collaboration, being the opposite of shared endeavour. But such communion is the basis of a good collaborative relationship. Ross and I have few opportunities to meet with Mowanjum families in this relaxed and intimate community setting. It was an illustration of the precious time that we spent together.

### **Late night conversations**

Relating to people *up-country* offered unique opportunities to engage in extraordinary conversations. Such conversations offered other Boab participants and I an opportunity to experience a different world view to our own, again an empathic relating. We had a profound late



night conversation with the women early in the camp. We were resting together after dinner and talking about various experiences. As often occurs at night the subject gets on to cultural and spiritual matters. Lee-Anne recalled talking with the women the previous night about the spirits and their beliefs in these supernatural beings which absolutely form part of their whole belief system.

Lee-Anne acknowledged that the people trust us and have taken us into their circle. They trust us with stories and share their values and beliefs. As Lee-Anne reminded me, the people made themselves vulnerable to us. She felt very honoured that they were willing to do so. To empathise with the people and their stories is to be affected radically. The women had shared stories of what happens around life and death issues. Lee-Anne said that she found the early stories were fascinating because they resonated with her own experience as a nurse. She had seen glimpses before, but the sharing put things in context. But she was shocked at the story of what happens to widows on the husband's death. She stated:

*I was shocked at the poverty that the widows take on when they walk out. I was really shocked at that, because many of the widows would be old people. And to walk out in just what you are wearing; it is huge, isn't it? All the things that you have surrounded yourself in to make your life more comfortable you just have to leave them behind and rely on the community to take care of you and not even your own community, because they have to move away from that community. So how do they even survive? I found that really a challenge. You know they cannot even stay in their own community where people know them and they know others (Recorded conversation with Ross and Lee-Anne, 10 October 2011).*

Such stories together with the accounts of the reality of life in Mowanjum flowed out of our time at Poulton Pool. Again, we were moving way beyond collaboration into what it means to be with the people relatingly. Such empathy also makes us vulnerable to feelings of overwhelm or helplessness. It is not a matter of solving people's problems but of listening and seeing life from another perspective. We were introduced to a radically different understanding as the following stories illustrate.

I had spoken to Gordon Barunga some time before about the people's understanding of the spirit world. Gordon explained to me the risks of being taken by spirits when out in country. He shared a night out in the bush where the camp members were conscious of a malevolent spirit.

*Because you got thing, you got hurt when you were out there. You know that night when N... was there. And P... and the crying like a baby thing. That bird, it whistle you know. The spirit bird. It whistles and you hear that noise. I hear that bird flying around everywhere. He hears it when a baby crying he take their soul. He take their spirit away you know. So that was flying around the camp. Some baby was crying and we tell 'em to make the baby stop crying. So P... was going around telling everybody to make the baby stop crying. I hear the bird too. Gagaja (Recorded conversation, 11 July 2011).*



Figure 44: Night flight

Lee-Anne recounted the children openly talking about their spirituality.

*The spirit of the waterhole you know. You can't go near the edge because the spirit will get you and as it started to get dark the kids becoming very fidgety and nervous and the smallest child in the group I was with one girl clinging to me physically because she was afraid that she would be stolen by the jillinga. And it makes their spirituality come alive when you see them living it. When they feel comfortable enough with us to talk about it with us and tell us (recorded conversation, Ross and Lee-Anne, 10 October 2011).*

I replied that the same child went from one end of the camp to the other, holding my hand. Lee-Anne then shared:

*I said to one of the children who came to sleep in our camp, "Why don't you put your sleeping bag here?" She said, "No, I will put it here, you put yours there!" And she gave me a funny look, you know. Rolling of the eyes, sort of you know look. And I said, do you mean the spirits and she said yes. I had to be on the outside of the circle to protect her. And when she needed to get up in the night to come with her and to be aware of her and that I had to listen for the spirits during the night to make sure that nobody stole her. And you know, they were very trusting and they, I felt like I was serving a real role (Recorded conversation, 6 October 2011).*

### **Late night fears**

These examples of spirit-talk are akin to Latour's understanding of love talk in so far as we are invited into another world, a different way of perceiving reality. It is challenging to our Western conceptual frame of reference. I avoid analysing such accounts or trying to fit them into our theoretical framework. They are best left as other. Yet as we listen so we are given insight into the metaphysics that underlie relating and relationship.

It was important to see life from this other perspective. Again this is an empathic response that enabled us to be a source of comfort and security for the children. In this story, as in previous

stories, we move from work oriented collaboration, to an empathic relating, open to the life view and needs of people in our midst.

### **A shared concern**

*I was asked to speak with a young person who had just tried to commit suicide. It is not appropriate to go into the details of this conversation. Unfortunately this story had a painful end. I led his funeral two years later, ministering to the family and the community at a time of significant loss.*

The consequences of such empathy can be painful indeed. I would have hoped for a different ending, and am still coming to terms with this young person's death. He reminds me that the Boab Network was invited into the community to respond to the growing number of youth suicides. We have responded with a consistent children and youth program, yet feel vulnerable to continuing situations such as this. To empathise with the people and their pain is therefore also to be open to such loss of those who have become our friends.

### **Laughter helps transcend the cultural divide**

*We heard raucous laughter from Kirsty's camp. Jo's son, Tristine, was entertaining the children with an application from his phone which transformed their voices into a cat's. I went over to investigate. Jo amused both children and adults with her contortions leading to reactions from Aboriginal people, both children and adults. We were really relaxed in each other's company (Personal journal, October 2011).*

The night's interaction describes what is possible when trans-cultural differences are transcended and we meet each other in spontaneous ways. I have no idea what might flow from such an interaction, but a night of laughter opens new possibilities for co-action because the boundaries have been relaxed, indeed transcended.

The above accounts illustrate the breaking down of barriers that happened at Poulton Pool. Gergen (2009) writes, "Building local realities and recognizing them as 'ours' are important steps toward bonding" (p. 179). It is tempting to edit such material as being inconsequential to the weightier aspects of my thesis. However, in Gergen's terms, an enchantment is taking place that forms a new sense of the relationship. This is not a reasoned act but rather a "relationship that

grows from more primitive, natural and foundational origins” (p. 181). We were creating new ways of being together in radical contradiction to trans-cultural relations of the past.

## 5.10 Challenges



Figure 45: Snagged

I experienced a fundamental conflict. I felt as if my research had been snagged, not unlike a net caught up by a rock (in figure 45). The more that I relaxed into an empathic relating to the land and the people, the more I found myself in tension with my research intentions. It came to a head in the following encounter.

*I had breakfast with an Ngarinyin Elder and the realisation that I do not need to be talkative with this old woman. I was content simply to be with her and to receive the porridge that she gave me. I think that we whitefellas want to say too much and do too much. I realised that I must learn a new way of being. I was enjoying being in this old woman's company and she responded later by sharing her life story, beginning with her connection with Kunmunya. I admit that I cannot remember what she said in detail, nor did I want to record her story at that point. I may return to it at another time. It is clear to me that being with Aboriginal people is being willing to wait for the right moment which will come (Personal Journal)*

*On another occasion, I found myself getting very tired, and sought out the healing presence of this old woman who had become a kind of mentor figure for me. I noted in my diary that although I had yet another bout of exhaustion and despair, I decided to ignore my despair. I went and had a conversation with her and she shared her family history. I wished that I could have recorded her story with my digital recording but I did not want to destroy the moment. I decided that I would leave this aside and enter more fully into being in that place and with these extraordinary people. I learnt that place matters more than any agenda I might have. There is a time and place for research and it must take second priority to being with my friends out on the land (Personal Journal, October 2011).*

I spoke with Kirsty about this encounter, and she said, “Remember she saw you walking around and she said, ‘Come and relax’” (Recorded conversation, Kirsty Burgu, 11 October 2011). I said that I had forgotten to relax. I was learning to be with land and people rather than to work. I explained that there is a real risk that when we go away with Mowanjum people we do a lot of work, tire ourselves out and are not really in the same way that Aboriginal people are with the land. Kirsty replied, “You are trying to say that you just want to work and work but never relax your body”. I reminded her that it was exactly what a senior Elder had said: come and rest. Kirsty added:

And do things, for us, like you guys were working in the hot sun! And during that time you relax. You know, that time. That sun would just knock you out. When it is cool that is the time we move around. Like when the sun go down, it is cooler, we could do hard work. But you guys was working right in the hot sun. I think that’s why she was telling you rest, you know. Instead of sitting down and relaxing. But I think that you guys was on a schedule.

I said that I think that’s a whitefella thing. Kirsty summed it up as “Rush, rush, rush”.

This was a watershed moment for me as the researcher. I had come to a deeper understanding of what, why and how I was researching over time, given the relating and relationships that had developed. I realised that I was creating a new approach to research based on relating rather than on researching in the traditional mode. I had approached my research with particular questions and intentions, as that is natural. But in this moment, the ground had

collapsed. How could I research relating and being, when such research destroyed or interrupted the nature of being and of relating?

To relate empathically or feel with the people and the land was to enter into this profound conflict. The more that I relaxed into the land, the more unsettled I became because it was challenging long held assumptions that I should be doing something intentional, with the emphasis on the “should”. I was being challenged to be with the people and the land rather than to continue to rush and work hard. However, I was not the only non-Indigenous person struggling with this conflict. Lee-Anne shared how she encountered the land and the difficulty of being responsible for organisation as well. I spoke with Lee-Anne early in the camp, to check how she was doing, particularly with the organisation. Lee-Anne told me that she found herself frustrated because she “started a hundred lovely conversations and was interrupted at least 300 times” (Recorded conversation, Ross and Lee-Anne, 5 October 2011). She then shared a special moment that she had down by the creek with Mickey and Theresa. She went to sit with their family and began talking about fishing. She said she had never been fishing or caught a fish. The old woman reassured her that “she goes fishing lots and she has never caught a fish”. Later, Mickey remembered what she said and showed her how to do it. As Lee-Anne said:

He showed me how to tie the knots to put the hook without me having to ask again. It was really lovely, I thought you, you were listening and in a very quiet way he started to address that expressed need of mine to learn how to fish. And that was kind of special and then I was having a lovely conversation with Theresa. It was one of those desultory conversations with lots of long silences and a little comment here and there.

I later spoke with Theresa and asked if she thought people enjoyed having us with them. She said, “I reckon when you are there you do a good job with the kids and with the people”. I said to her, “Well thank you; that’s what I want to hear because I would hate to be intruding. But I don’t feel that. I feel that we are all in it together”. This led Theresa to talk to me about our inability to relax:

Theresa said, “Sometimes when we see you do so much things, we like you to sit down.” I asked her if we do too much and she answered yes. I said, “So we don’t relax enough?” Theresa laughed and said that I only relax when everybody is ready to go down. That is when people are ready for bed. I said that I would feed this back to Ross and others. But Theresa added, “It’s just like us, we can’t relax when the kids are like that. We got to keep an eye

on them at the same time”. She told me that they liked it when Ross and Lee-Anne and I played with the kids and were very happy. They were telling us to do this or that or carry them on their backs. I said that one of the thoughts that I had was that next time I go out I would try and relax more. Theresa said that:

*We say to each other while we were sitting there, they should leave Rob alone, he looks very tired. We were saying that and when they came back we talked to them. Rob is very tired. He is doing a lot of things for you. When he goes swimming, just swim with him, don't jump on him* (Recorded conversation, 10 October 2011).

She continued to say that because it was hot. We were concerned about you, you and Ross. I was touched by this and said that this has been a very important thing to hear. I replied, “That’s what makes it special to relate to you mob, I feel that you take care of and interest in us”.

Theresa’s empathic concern for me illustrates a difference between Indigenous and non-Indigenous approaches to those events which threaten the collective relational process. I am trained to take personal responsibility and at times this can tire me out. I observe that Aboriginal people take a collective approach. My health is their concern not simply because it affects me, but because it affects the group health and relating to the land. When we (the Boab members and I) act in ways that interrupt the natural flow and relating, then Elders such as Theresa share their concerns with us. At times, we frame our objectives and intentions as a way of dealing with our insecurities, particularly as we engage unfamiliar territory.

This story illustrates a watershed in my learning because it provided yet another opportunity to review this approach and in future seek to be empathic to the needs and wishes of the wider group. Ironically, the more out of control and the more vulnerable I feel, the greater the opportunity to learn. And as these examples illustrate, my Aboriginal mentors are keen to guide this learning, not only for my sake but the health of the larger group. Such learning took place within the context of reciprocal and mutual relating. I and others gave to the group, as we did in looking after the children and other group needs. Yet, we are not left alone by the group because our health is a matter of concern. When Theresa stated that “Rob is very tired”, she acknowledged my work, but coincidentally was very aware that the group purpose would be weakened if I were



further weakened by the children. The people operate with an inter-related rather than individualistic consciousness. This thinking radically affected my approach to research, and led me to review my research process (see chapters 6 and 7 to follow). The above conversation with Theresa also affirms that it is vital that collaboration merge into a relational process, not simply work directed. We were co-labouring, co-doing, co-being, co-learning and co-thinking. The major objective, if there is any, is the building of relating, not the achievement of an outcome. This conflict between the primacies of doing over being is not new. My career as an actuary reinforced the notion that work was of greater importance than relationship or spending time with the place where I lived in a creative and intuitive way. Later as minister in the Uniting Church, I learnt the value of reflection and preparing for the week in a meditative and intuitive way. But as the above vignettes illustrate, when pressures mounted I would turn to work rather than relationship and the land. The camp at Poulton Pool offered me an opportunity to see this in new and challenging way.

### **5.11 Final reflections**

We collaborated at Poulton Pool, as members of the Boab Network and staff of the Arts Centre worked together to make this event possible. I therefore spent time with the manager and staff to reflect on the significance of the camp. We noted that the camp was a success as a kid's camp with good art outcomes in the area of children's art. At least ten children produced work and some produced art of excellent quality. The camp fostered a new generation of artists. That said, we acknowledged the difficulty for the adult artists producing work of a professional quality in the setting, given the heat and presence of many children. It meant that Rachel, Mickey and Jo were feeding the children.

Jo acknowledged that the camp worked "because it brought people together for different reasons" (Recorded conversation, 9 July 2013). Her objective was to take out the adult artists to replenish the paintings sold at the festival. Her intention was to create an art camp while ours was to be with an extended family of children and youth.

It was noted that the children behave differently when they are in the bush. As the parents say, "When you are out there you are good!" Some children actually say that something is going to happen when the Boab Network comes, and they look forward to the opportunity for creativity and adventure. Kids can be bored at Mowanjum, so it is important for them to get to the bush with hunting and fishing rather than fighting and even stealing, back in the community. Being with the kids is a collaborative endeavour. Rachel suggested that we need the parents to help us to control the kids even though they relate to us well. It was also noted that there were too many children for

Jo to provide artist support and teaching. It was a hard ask, particularly when she was supporting the artists.

I asked Rachel and Mickey about their understanding of their roles. For Rachel it was cooking, watching the kids and helping Jo. For Mickey it was calling them to the feed, guiding the children and disciplining them if necessary. I was conscious that we did not meet and prepare as a team. We had a mad rush to get away to Poulton Pool at the beginning of the week. It had caused us a lot of strain to get all the supplies together, which meant that we had no time to form a relationship with the other leadership team. In other words, we felt that we had no relationship with the community. I wondered if this detracted from the camp, not being a team during this time. In their minds, it was not important as they had been preparing for the camp with the Arts Centre mob. They noted that Ross and I constantly visited the various camps of the families and that this created a sense of cohesion.

Thus, this sharing confirmed that we had engaged in a collaborative event. Later when I spoke with Ross and Lee-Anne, they also affirmed this collaboration. They were surprised by the way that the children collaborated with us to make this a special camp. Lee-Anne noted that the children “really got into the act”. This is something new for her despite the fact that she has been regularly undertaking activities with them. She said:

I have seen one or two, but all the kids were doing it. So we started to see this culture of achievement in the art. The kids were starting to be proud of what they were doing. And they were all trying hard to do good paintings. And I actually didn't hear any spontaneous chats from the kids about money it was going to earn them. I don't think that was a priority in their minds. I think they were interested in painting and producing some artwork. So that was really great (Recorded conversation, 10 October 2011),

The children drew us into their culture and society. Ross reminded us of all the fish that the children caught which supplemented our diet. As Ross said, “In fact if we had had no meat at all we would have lived like kings out there on barramundi for the whole five days” (Recorded conversation, 8 October 2011). The children also shared in the child minding and looked after the children who could not swim. All the logistics such as the setting up and the knocking down of the shelters was a collaborative effort.

Thus I would conclude that this camp was an example of collaboration, but not in the usual work related sense. It was collaborative relating. Everyone had contributed to building a

unique opportunity for being together on the land. We, in the Boab Network, spent a lot of time building relationships with the children and it paid off for us. Although we had some concerns about our sense of the wider team, the experience held together. There were two sides to the program. One was the art and one was the kids. Ross added, “I know nothing about art and I don’t pretend and I was quite happy that we were leaving the art to them. And we were focussing on the kids which is what we did” (Recorded conversation, 8 October 2011). It certainly was not a waste of time playing with six year old children. Indeed, that is how the Boab Network began. Ross thought of one of the children with whom he related, a six year old who could hardly swim. Now the boy is fourteen, and Ross has a good relationship with him. These relationships with the young children have the potential to be very important as they grow up and continue to relate to us.

I summed up this conversation by saying that what we are developing is a model of collaboration which merged into a relational process, not simply work directed. We were co-labouring, co-doing, co-being, co-learning and co-thinking. The major objective, if there is any, is the building of relationship, not the achievement of an outcome. Ross replied: “Well yeah, exactly, and that’s why we have to keep guarding against getting outcomes. We are not here for an outcome. The outcome is the building of the relationship and that is all that it is”. Ross then related the discussion back to the Boab Network, saying that he is uncomfortable when he sees emails passing within our group evaluating our success by the number of children or youth involved. We are not chasing those outcomes. Our success should be measured by the establishment and nurture of relationships, which is much more difficult to measure.

Bruno Latour (2002) criticises non-Indigenous over-concern for doing and intentional action. Latour asserts that technology belongs to the question of means while morality concerns itself with the ends. His words are sharp and incisive when he states: “To become moral and human once again, it seems we must always tear ourselves away from instrumentality, reaffirm the sovereignty of ends, rediscover Being; in short, we must bind back the hound of technology to its cage” (p. 247). I resonate with the words assuming that the ends are both a rediscovery of being and relating; that is what I have sought to do in engaging the land with Aboriginal families from Mowanjum. I seek a healing of that connection with land that has been severed by my Western technology and ontology. Latour quotes a simple example of taking a hammer on his work bench. There in this piece are the aeons of earth time in the iron, years in the wood, those different time periods, “heterogeneous temporalities”, to which he adds his own time space (p. 249).

I bound back the “hound of technology” when I left aside my need to engage in research and decided that the very act of research, in holding a camera, or a digital recorder acted against the spirit of our relating. The camera is not some disengaged object, it is part of me, indeed, I am expressing myself through the camera. I am the camera, a disquieting thought. I was engaging in an empathic relating, described by both deep listening and compassion. I was seeking in this experience of land and culture to reconnect the present to the underlying aeons of time within the experience. In so doing I learnt the value of *relatingly* being with the people on land and allowing this to transform my life.

The Poulton Pool camp challenged my way of being and doing. I returned to Poulton pool in 2013 with a small group of the Boab Network, Mowanjum adults and twenty children/youth. The 2011 visit had made me more aware of being in the land, and open to the needs of the people. I brought a “laissez faire” approach to leadership which means that I gave little direction and assumed that others would make their own decisions. This in turn has its weaknesses, for we failed to think about such basics as the latrine and within twenty-four hours the surrounds of the camp were littered with toilet paper. It is one thing to empathise with land and with people; it is another to bring order creatively to a camp and not permit it to descend into chaos. This return visit also made me aware of the responsibility of looking after children in a dangerous environment. As we did not have many Mowanjum adults, our camp was short for we had to continually be on the alert for the young children who could easily drown in the deeper water. Thus empathy is more than a compassionate being with the land; it involves clear-headed organisation that ensures the safety of the people concerned. I will explore this question further in chapter 7.

However, I was challenged to put this new learning into practice. In October 2012, we walked alongside Eddie and his family as they returned to Majaddin. I describe this journey in chapter 6. I and members of the Boab Network were guests and allies as we collaboratively related to Eddie and his family on their lands. As this trip was action oriented, I will explore what it means to undertake research that leads to action within the context of Participatory Action Research.

## Chapter 6

### Return to Majaddin 2012



Figure 46: Black cocky takes the lead

## 6.1 Burning off

I returned to Majaddin in 2012 very aware of what it means to be the guest of and an ally to Mowanjum families as they engaged their traditional lands. Accordingly, I head this chapter with the image of two cockies with the black cockie clearly in control, as was the case when we returned to Eddie Bear's land (figure 46). He was directing what we would do on his land because we were his guests and he was our host.

This return to Majaddin completed a succession of four journeys *up-country*. I have been applying the methodology explained in chapter 2: lighting the fire of the initial question, "What does it mean to collaborate *up-country*?" through the various stages of gathering data, cooking, moving from camp to camp and sharing. In the process, I discovered that collaboration is a limited concept, particularly when I am a guest in a host/guest relationship, or empathically relating to the people and the land. My focus at times was not on what it might mean to take action, even shared action as in collaboration, but what it meant to relate and be an ally in this trans-cultural relating. Such relating and relationship is fundamental to trans-cultural collaboration. I found myself grappling with a deeper question – namely, what does it mean to research a trans-cultural relationship involving Aboriginal people? This question emerged as I found myself taking action during and after this journey under the direction of Eddie and his family. In this respect, did my research fit a Participatory Action Research (PAR) design framework even though I had not originally thought of it as such?

The 2012 visit to Majaddin as briefly described in section 6.2 was an action filled experience. In this chapter I explore where it fits within a PAR framework. I first introduce PAR methodology (section 6.3), which for me includes the reflective practice of Praxis (section 6.4). I reflect on the 2012 journey as an example of PAR, noting that we approached this journey with a clear set of intentional actions in mind, having discussed these with my host Eddie Bear (section 6.5). These actions can be grouped into four categories of action: **practical, relating and relationships, creative and organisational**.

First, our return to Majaddin involved significant practical action such a repairing the plumbing equipment. My involvement in these actions was far more than the first journey to Majaddin (section 6.5). Second, this journey, like others, focussed on nurturing our relationships with children and adults (sections 6.6-6.8) facilitated by Ross Gobby and Lee-Anne Burnett. Third, in terms of creative action, we members of the Boab Network intended to introduce a creative edge to our work with the children, following up on the "burst of creativity" which occurred at Poulton Pool. We were fortunate to have the assistance of two visual artists, Katie

Breckon and Tessa McOnie, who introduced visual art techniques and video to the children (section 6.9). The fourth category of action is that of organisation. Not only did I help to organise this return to Majaddin, but I also assisted a *Wilinggin* Ranger who had the task of reporting on the Indigenous Protected Areas agreement (IPA) to the people at Majaddin. I was asked to coordinate and chair a meeting on land while we were on this journey to Majaddin (section 6.11).

My research then was clearly action oriented even though I had not intentionally framed it in this way. In exploring the question of what it means to research a trans-cultural relationship, I found that my research accords with the general principles and approach of PAR. My research has been participatory, though with less emphasis on the associated formalities. It has certainly resulted in significant actions. However, such actions concerned the nurturing of relationships as much as practical or “objective” outcomes.

## **6.2 Overview of the 2012 Majaddin journey**

We set out on Sunday 30 September 2012 and drove to the Dodnun Aboriginal Community near Mt Elizabeth Station. The major challenge was an unexpected storm which altered our plans to camp at Mt Elizabeth. The next day, we went through *Magpie Jump-up* – that sharp descent that marks the boundary to Majaddin. It was a difficult drive for me, with a critical audience of Aboriginal children in the back. At Majaddin, we set up camp and worked on repairs to the water pipes, burnt in a fire. The rain continued and we spent a damp night.

On Tuesday Ross, Eddie and I spent more time fixing the plumbing. Our next task was to find some bush food. The hunt involved a long trip searching for the right beast. Eddie shot a cow and other Aboriginal men cut it up. We returned for a late lunch followed by a swim. Later in the day we had a meeting to discuss the Indigenous Protected Area (IPA) proposal. We only had one major issue: we lost the keys to the hire car and did not find these until the last day at Majaddin. On Wednesday we went fishing. This meant a difficult negotiation of unmarked terrain. We soon had “a good mob of fish”, but the return drive for one of our drivers was eventful with three flat tyres. On the way back, Eddie showed Ross and me his plans for the community. Later Ross and I joined him to record a conversation and to take photos of the area where he plans to build houses and other community facilities.

On Thursday, the final full day at Majaddin, I began by helping Eddie again with the water pump. Eddie then invited me to go on a trip with him to get cycad seeds to grow at Mowanjum. We travelled a long way, stopping at an Aboriginal grave site. The day ended in a

contemplative manner. We then went to see the sun setting on the red rocks. It was great to sit and meditate as the sun went down; it allowed me to find peace after a busy time.

We also talked about the future needs of Majaddin in light of the proposed IPA agreement. I met with the Bear family and recorded their thoughts. The meeting was interrupted by Katie Breckon (curator at the Mowanjum Arts Centre), who with the children had compiled two videos to record our travels. I was impressed that Katie produced a short video starring the children together with a video and photo account of the journey. These videos will be archived at the Arts Centre. Our return journey on Friday was easier than we imagined. We were able to drive our hire vehicle through *Magpie Jump-up* despite not having low gear. One car was not so lucky and got stuck for an hour.

Return to country continues to be of prime importance for Eddie and his family. I asked Eddie what it meant for him to go back to country. He said that it was important to bring his grandchildren, to show them the country and “Tell them where their grand-parents from” (Recorded conversation, 8 October 2012). I also asked Eddie’s sister in law Marion what it meant to go to Majaddin. Like Eddie said, it was an opportunity to take children and grandchildren out to experience their grandfather’s country. It was the first time for Marion’s daughter, who really loved it. Marion, like Eddie, had a vision for the future. It would be a place for troubled children. She said, “It would be like Eddie said: ‘A healing place’” (Recorded conversation, 8 October 2012). I asked what changes happened with the kids. Marion noticed that some did not want to go back to Mowanjum and would have preferred to stay *up-country* at Majaddin. It reminded me of a conversation I had with one of the adolescent girls who would have preferred to stay out at Majaddin. Marion said to one of her grandchildren, “When I go back and get everything ready, you can come back then”.

### 6.3 Participatory Action Research

It seems strange to be arriving at a clearer understanding of my research methodology at the end of my research rather than at the beginning. I intentionally avoided framing my research question from theoretical reading, and deliberately did not approach this work with a predominant Western methodology. I wanted to be open to the emergent process rather than bringing a defined set of expectations even in my methodology.

I intentionally immersed myself in Aboriginal culture and thinking as I related to the people and the land. At times, this approach seriously challenged my Western philosophical and practical framework. Now, having completed a number of *up-country* journeys, I realised that this



emergent process needs to be integrated within a Western framework. It is now my task to relate my findings within the context of Western academia. Indigenous researcher Karen Martin (2003) recognises this dilemma, after noting her community relational approach to being, learning and doing. She argues that “for Indigenous research to be recognised by the academy of western research it must also identify its methodology” (p. 12). If this is true for an Indigenous scholar, then it is also important for a non-Indigenous researcher such as me. My research also offers a unique perspective, for it is focussed neither on the methodological approach nor on the outcome of the research. It is focussed on relating in and throughout the research process.

Reason and Bradbury (2008) define Action Research as:

a participatory process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes. It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities (p. 4).

The definition supports my understanding of what it means to be part of the Boab Network, which organises its life and programs in response to the stated needs of the Mowanjum community. However, as I discovered, the “pursuit for practical solutions to issues” requires significant listening, an empathic awareness through a long period of relating. This awareness undergirds the Majaddin journey, for one significant need is to continue to develop the community’s connection with traditional lands, despite the challenge of long distances, high costs and organisational problems. My research focuses on this need, but also has implications for the ways in which the Boab Network engages with other community needs including school age children/youth work.

As Reason and Bradbury (2008) explain, there are five fundamental characteristics of PAR (p. 5). These characteristics affirm an emergent process, participation and democracy, knowledge in action, practical issues and human flourishing:

**An emergent process** is central to PAR: “Good action research emerges over time in an evolutionary and developmental process, as individuals develop skills of inquiry and as communities of inquiry develop within communities of practice” (Reason and Bradbury, 2008, p. 5). Although the researcher may bring his or her own expectations and research understanding, PAR assumes a collaborative approach to research which emerges from relating among the researcher and those who become co-researchers in the process.

**Participation and democracy** reflect a significant change from a seemingly “objective” and detached approach to research. There is no such thing as “objectivity” and “detachment” because to undertake research involving people means that one is always in some form of a relationship. The question then becomes: to what extent should/can others participate in critical decisions regarding the process and application of the research? I was a participant observer well before I began this research, as I recorded my work and journeys with the Mowanjum people over a decade of volunteer activities. However, my task has been to open up the participation to others – both Indigenous and non-Indigenous – through conversations both along the way and by sharing my draft thesis with key people of the Mowanjum community in 2013.

In reviewing many approaches to PAR, Catherine Cassell and Phil Johnson (2006) review differences in the philosophical understandings and the “role played by, and the significance attached to, democracy in action research praxis” (p. 796). In other words, there is emphasis on people participating in a democratic way. I have sought to listen to Mowanjum needs with my research process arising from their invitation and guidance. This has not been democratic in a formal way as might apply with non-Aboriginal communities and corporations who include processes of analytic dialogue and feedback or even the use of forums as Clare Land (2011) has undertaken with east coast Aboriginal groups (p. 45). I have followed guidelines for research with Indigenous communities but not involving formal negotiations, scheduled feedback sessions and the intention of involvement of Indigenous professionals as suggested by Sally Davis and Raymond Reid (1999, p. 758S). I chose informal conversations with individuals, which I believe suited the people involved in this research. I constantly deferred to Eddie, who is Chairman of the Mowanjum Council, in order that the results of my inquiry reflect the culture and ethos of the Mowanjum people.

**Knowledge in action** affirms the fact that research is not meant to produce theories about action, but rather to apply the emergent knowledge into an action based relationship with the community or participants concerned. It assumes different relationships, different ways of perceiving knowledge and is different in relation to practice. Reason and Bradbury (2008) argue that PAR’s primary purpose is to provide practical knowledge (p. 4). If by “practical” they mean that it can contribute to change in the community, I agree. My research process concerns knowledge that arises from the experience of being in relationship with both Mowanjum families and their country. But I have regarded my major knowing as learning to relate in all of its complexity and passing this learning onto the Boab Network and wider dissemination through this thesis, other publications and talks. Such knowledge can produce new ways of knowing, including

how non-Indigenous people might relate across the cultural divide and how they may find again a lost skill and the very basis of community/communion.

This leads to concern for **Practical Issues**. For Reason and Bradbury this means “to produce practical knowledge that is useful to people in the everyday conduct of their lives” (p. 4). I agree with this understanding but note that the researcher should not approach such research with the intention of changing a people or community. Robin McTaggart (1991) in outlining principles of Participatory Action Research argues that PAR “is concerned simultaneously with changing both individuals *and* the culture of the groups, institutions, and societies to which they belong” (p. 172, including original emphasis).

**Human flourishing** means that the purpose of such research is the positive transformation of community and individuals. In this respect Kenneth and Mary Gergen (2008) argue that Action Research is not about writing or producing an accurate map of what is experienced as if it were unchanging. Indeed, for action researchers the world is ever changing and hopefully for the better as a consequence of the research (p. 167). I agree and hope that our involvement led to the children seeing possibilities with their art, and in creative activities generally. I also hope that the opportunity to return to land provides a reminder to the youth about their birth-right and encourages them to remember this when they face challenges such as drugs and alcohol that might affect them in less desirable ways.

Thus my journeys with the people of Mowanjum have enabled me to participate in and contribute to their larger vision of regaining their connection with the land, which was hampered when they were shifted to Derby hundreds of kilometres from these lands. I have been privileged to hear firsthand their desires for the future and their intention to reinvigorate this connection, and I also have been given opportunities to join with them as they genuinely realise this aim. This is clearly action research involving me being an ally in this long term struggle.

## 6.4 Introduction to Praxis

Following each journey I had the integrative task of putting the experience of the trip into some context. This task is, as Patricia Wicks, Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury (2008) argue, a living inquiry. They surveyed the thoughts of key PAR theorists and noted the importance of practice and life experiences with their particular political and philosophical underpinnings within a complex “web of relationships, events, influences, role models and experiences which underpins action researchers’ practice” (p. 15). They note Fals Borda’s (2001) description of the merging of diverse influences interacting and fusing. The resultant “integration of theory and practice; of

scholarship and activism; and more generally, integration of numerous perspectives and life experiences into meaningful accounts” illustrates the work of praxis (p. 16).

I encountered the word “praxis” forty years ago in conversation with Uniting Church educator Dr Cliff Wright. He frequently used the word to describe a reflective process on his work in the Pacific Islands (Wright, & Tonga Council of Churches, 1979). Mike Pedler and John Burgoyne (2008) speak of praxaeology, which “donates *praxis* – practice or doing – in the original Greek; but also as in Marx’s usage, the inseparable unity of theory and practice, thinking and doing”. They argue this practice of reflection should take account of the “contextualized and situated nature of human actions and activities” (p. 327). This is not a new argument, for this is what Wright was trying to achieve in his day. He was situating his thought in the culture of the people of the Pacific.

This process of reflection on experience called praxis, for Wright, was fundamentally concerned about social justice. Stephen Kemmis (2001) recognises this by quoting one of the founders of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, Max Horkheimer, who describes such critical theory as “motivated by a deep concern to overcome social injustice and the establishment of more just social conditions for all people” (p. 125). This “objective” position is therefore imbued with values, particularly as Kemmis argues that such critical theory aims to find “how particular perspectives, social structures and practices ‘conspire’ to produce untoward effects”. This statement resonates with the ethos of the Boab Network, which began its involvement with Mowanjum because of the high incidence of youth suicide. Indeed the reason for why we were engaging in this journey to Majaddin was to support the Bear family; the return to country provides meaning not only to Elders such as Eddie and Vince Bear but to their grandchildren who accompanied them on this journey and others.

An underlying basis of praxis is that of relationship. Praxis has to do with and emerges from a process of sharing place and time, including that receptivity where the gift is given and received. It also involves sacrifice which implies working for the good of the whole whether community or cosmos rather than the aspirations of the individual (Conversation with Jacques Boulet, October 2013).

I relate to this understanding given that my work and reflection emerges from more than a decade of relationship with the people of Mowanjum. Thus shared time is an important aspect of my praxis. This research constitutes but a small part of my total relationship with the people to date, and has offered me an opportunity to reflect on the implications of this larger time space. I have also shared critical space with the people, experiencing their traditional lands with them.

Praxis is fundamentally an ongoing conversation between two distinct peoples and with oneself. Maritza Montero (2000) notes that this means accepting the Other in their full distinctiveness: “It is by accepting the Otherness (alterity) of that person, that the full possibility of a dialogue, a fundamental condition for PAR, is established” (p. 135).

This inevitably has impacted on my understanding of collaboration. As I explored in other chapters, to collaborate with Aboriginal people on their lands is to be constantly aware of what it means for me and other non-Indigenous participants to be a guest. To experience lands with Traditional Owners constitutes a gift and with it a responsibility both to accept the gift but also to respond to the gift in a reciprocal way. This means that my research sits within this reciprocal relationship. I am not simply a stranger entering Aboriginal space then leaving when I finish the thesis. I have entered into a long term reciprocal relationship, received numerous gifts of friendship and the sharing of culture and in my own way giving back to the people. Not only should the final product of the research be of significant benefit for the community, but there needs to be reciprocal giving along the way. Praxis involves the creative reflection on this process of exchange. Thus undertaking research with an Aboriginal community such as Mowanjum is at once more complex and more simple than research in the mainstream Australian community. It is complex because of all the layers of disadvantage occasioned by history, conflict, class, race and institutional arrangements. It is simple when I encounter people *up-country*. These issues become less relevant in the face of day to day survival. As Jacques Boulet reminded me, such giving and receiving also demands sacrifice. My Western individualistic basis places primary impetus on individual needs, whether the gaining of a PhD or a subsequent career. These needs are secondary to the wider notion of the good of the whole community. This is certainly a vocational issue, for I regard my work as a calling which has arisen over these years in order to complete a larger work which I am discovering. Praxis is the work of reflecting on this larger calling, and avoiding a narrow understanding which would box research in university or personal categories. This is the social justice or awareness dimension of the work in which the question must always be asked: “What is of ultimate good for the community and for the creative sustaining of a relationship?” Although this question and the work of praxis are concerned with the outer world and issues of justice and equity, praxis inevitably involves introspection and exploring one’s personal ontology.

The work of reflection thus includes that subjective reflection on my own experience of both the outer and inner world, as I record the journey in detail, my thoughts and feelings about the journey, including those dreams and images relevant to the journey. This is supplemented by conversations and a wider dialogue as I interact with the Boab Network, university and other

agencies. It includes a process of reflection with Elders from Mowanjum as I share my thoughts and images concerning my research with them (see chapter 7).

Such praxis which underlies PAR methodology ranges from the personal to the social. William Torbert and Steve Taylor (2008), for instance, write of three arenas of action inquiry, beginning with the first person. They speak of territories within this first person experience which include thoughts, the realm of vision/attention/intention, one's feelings and sensed behaviour, and the outside world as objectified and discrete (p. 242). I have tried to be attentive to a wider range of data in various territories including my own dream world. However, I have also tried to be attentive to second person inquiry as I have listened to others in our conversations. Their final stage is that of third person inquiry, which means applying the research analytically to organisations, i.e. the larger framework. For my research, this involves reflection on the larger relationships with the university, the Mowanjum community and the Boab Network.

I see praxis as also having a bifocal view: to be looking back at what has been experienced, and to be looking forward to what is possible. In looking back, I build on my continuing awareness of the importance of land for the Mowanjum people as described in past journeys. In looking forward, each journey introduced new possibilities and new ways of being in relationship with the people and the land. For example, I had journeyed to Majaddin in 2010 and had an opportunity to appreciate its importance for Eddie Bear and his family. This meant that I was open to conversations which led to me being asked to support one of the *Ngarinyin* rangers as he explained the significance of Indigenous Protected Areas to Eddie and his family. Sam Bayley, who coordinates the Indigenous Protected Area (IPA) program, could not join us on the second Majaddin trip and wanted me to keep notes of the discussion that followed the presentation and to forward a list of possible needs that could be met by the program. I agreed to do this because I felt that it accorded with the future vision of the people, noting of course that it was up to them to agree to this proposal.

Through praxis, I seek creative actions that may enhance our relationship with the Mowanjum people or further their future transformation. In reflecting on the camp at Poulton Pool (chapter 5), I became aware of the impact that art had on both the children and youth. We from the Boab Network had been impressed with the way that the children took to the art in this camp. Thus, I was keen to support two people who could offer creative activities in the 2012 visit to Majaddin. I asked Eddie if he were agreeable to having these creative artists come on the journey. I spent several hours with Tessa McOnie, a visual artist, to prepare her for the journey and to discuss what she might experience *up-country*. I had less opportunity to speak with Katie Breckon

from the Mowanjum Arts Centre other than encouraging her to explore creative opportunities with the children. I saw both people as offering important aspects of our journey as we engaged country together. As praxis it was yet another way of looking to the future possibilities for a generation who are under significant risk of suicide and other health problems. However, to my surprise, I found that I was engaging in Participatory Action Research and needed to explore this in more depth. I had been aware of being the guest and needing to follow the guidance of my host, yet again on reflection, I had initiated significant action by supporting or initiating these activities.

## **6.5 Intentional and Practical action**

I saw this journey to Majaddin as one of intentional and practical action. We, the non-Indigenous participants, were bringing our gifts and resources to link with the needs and wishes of the Bear family. It was pertinent that Eddie had not returned to Majaddin since our last visit and there was a good reason for this. It is a costly journey when involving a number of people. Our 2012 journey cost around \$5000 to provide food, fuel, tyres, hire cars and other logistics for thirty people to make the week-long journey. We needed to hire a generator, an extra car and purchased food and even tried to urge people to come with us. Aware of the last visit in 2010, I had developed a clear plan of action, together with Eddie and Ross who were my peers on this journey. We would be supporting Eddie and his family as he returned to his traditional lands. Eddie affirmed this support in a recent interview. He stated that we bring together resources (vehicles and other) not normally available to him (Recorded conversation, 6 July 2013).

This need for practical action meant that we from the Boab Network had to put aside our needs to explore the land and the caves as we had in 2010. Our major concern was to support Eddie and to care for the children. This awareness has come from understanding the huge demands placed on key Elders such as Eddie, particularly in the care and nurture of youth in their culture. Lee-Anne Burnett summed up the importance of this trip and others like it as “the renewal of relationships and the reinforcing of existing relationships” (Recorded conversation, 7 October 2012). Our other major concern was to continue to support the family’s relationship with their traditional lands. We were continually faced with organisational and action issues apart from those detailed above. We spent many hours solving other problems which affected the group. Ross and I helped Eddie with the water pump and other plumbing difficulties so that we would have showers and toilets. There were leaks all over the place. I learnt later that the plastic hose that we installed in our 2010 trip had been burnt by a fire lit to clear the land surrounding the settlement. Mending the hose proved to be a good collaborative exercise, but raised the question of whether we need someone with these skills and interests in future trips. Together we worked on

the plumbing, changed many tyres, went hunting for a cow to provide meat and generally looked to the wellbeing of the camp. Taking the additional hire car brought its own stresses, including trying to solve the absence of low-gears and the loss of the keys. These tasks were completed in a collaborative way with different people taking responsibility for different tasks. Indeed, as will be illustrated below, there is an intimate connection between doing and relating. Effective action presupposes creative and healthy relationships.

## **6.6 Taking effective action presupposes healthy and appropriate relating**

Relating to the people was crucial and underwrote what might be achieved together on this trip. We were seeing the benefits of maturing relationships, which contributed to the general ease and sense of fun present in the camp. We had learnt the importance of what it meant to relate to the land and the people in previous trips. We were beginning to understand our possible roles within the community. Being a guest did not mean that we would avoid assuming some responsibility. On the contrary, our host determined our responsibilities and what would be expected of us in the trip.

Ross, for example, spoke of the significant difference between this journey and his visit to Majaddin two years earlier. Rather than an encounter with the Other (that which is strange and unfamiliar in the sacred/spiritual sense) in the visit to the caves, this visit was a natural sharing of our deepening relationship. Indicators of a growth in our relating included a clearer understanding of our respective roles, a “normalisation” of the journey, growth in friendship, a relaxed and stress free environment and a significant change in the organisation of the camp, particularly with food (Recorded conversation, 7 October 2012).

### **Understanding and appreciation of roles**

We had different roles to play in this trip. I saw my major role as supporting Eddie and keeping an overall view on trans-cultural relationships, making sure nothing went wrong in the organisation of the trip. My research has enabled me to be more effective in this trans-cultural relating through constant reflection and study. Ross Gobby affirms this understanding: “Maybe that is why there were no dramas. You were clearly leader [for the Boab Network’s involvement] and taking responsibility for bringing the various parts together” (Recorded Conversation, 6 October 2012). Ross therefore did not worry about integrating a new member into the group and working out relationship issues with her. With Lee-Anne’s help he focused on the youth. Eddie was happy with this arrangement: “You come all the way from Perth to come and help us. It was good. It was good to also have Marion (Eddie’s sister in law) and Lee-Anne her daughter doing



those things. And we need to do that. I mean you mob can't do everything" (Recorded conversation, 8 October 2012).

The final sentence illustrates an important issue in the Mowanjum community –namely that it is important that the Boab Network not try to do too much. This reinforces that old agenda of making Aboriginal people dependent on White handouts and control. Marion, like Eddie, was happy with Ross and Lee-Anne taking responsibility for the children. She replied that it did not worry her that the whitefellas took the kids! She added: "No, that didn't worry me. Say if we went without you the family members would have had to control their own kids" (Recorded conversation, 8 October 2012). Again, Marion hints at this issue and raises the hard question: Are we inhibiting the involvement of Aboriginal people by our enthusiastic collaboration?

This question invites me to consider that paternalism inherent in Black/white relationships that have led to Aboriginal dependency. Anthropologist Barry Morris (2013) argues that "paternalism works as the benign face of racism" (p. 162). Paternalism grew out of the supposed necessity to intervene in Aboriginal life after colonisers had disenfranchised the people of their land and economic viability. I argued in chapter 4 that there is place for the ally as we join with Aboriginal people in their struggle to return to their land. But, as Clare Land (2012) argues, this means facing our innate racism as we seek to be effective allies. This innate racism includes our tendency to control and to encourage dependency. Although we in the Boab Network face this inherent danger of offering help and benevolence to the detriment of the Mowanjum people's independence, we also bring a long history of trans-cultural relating. Such relating includes diverse expressions and a variety of contexts and situations. We are continually mindful of this tendency to take over and even at times challenged in trans-cultural conversations.

Our visit to Majaddin involved a sharing of tasks, avoiding this paternalism. Marion took the role of organising food preparation and looking after the camp. This was a surprise to her because, as she said, "I didn't know that it would be all of this. I just went for the ride. Then I thought, hello, we have work to do" (Recorded conversation, 8 October 2012). As an aside, the trip enabled her to get to know us better. Marion saw this role as ongoing, for she asked me a question, "How are you going to get the lists?" She was asking how we would approach future journeys. I replied that when we do it next time, we would check with her.

Ross and Lee-Anne saw their primary roles as to look after the children. The parents and grandparents saw Ross and Lee-Anne as giving them an opportunity to release themselves from the burden of responsibility of the children. To quote Ross:

In some ways that is how the maturity of our relationship was expressed there. The Elders took it for granted that I would go off and do the things with the kids. And I didn't bother to talk with them about what we did or didn't do with the kids, in relationship with disciplining or where they rode in the car or what they did or didn't do. And the kids were the same. The kids don't question my role in being their carer (Recorded conversation, 7 October, 2012).

This illustrated the level of trust involved, particularly when Ross and Lee-Anne took the children swimming at the creek several kilometres from camp. However, I was also aware of Eddie's concern for the children. He still kept a watchful eye on what was going on. I shared with Ross that Eddie had noted that he wanted to head for a distant waterhole, off the "beaten track". This led Eddie to go too to ensure that Ross was safe and did not get bogged. Ross agreed that Eddie made the right decision because having seen the track (or lack of a track), they would never have found the river (Recorded conversation, 7 October 2012).

Our other support came from the rangers who, as Eddie reminded me, brought equipment and support at critical times. Both Ross and I gave practical support to Eddie, whom we regarded as our leader and host. Doing things such as repairing the plumbing offered opportunities to nurture our relationship. Ross felt the same, saying: "The innovation came from him but there were a few bits of contribution that I could make to the plumbing. I think that he appreciated that. It is good to have somebody to bounce ideas off and screw the other bolt up is handy" (Recorded conversation, 6 October 2012) .

### **Normalisation of the journey**

The strength of our relating has come from long term relating with Eddie and his mob. This meant that we undertook this journey to Majaddin with limited objectives. The camp was uneventful for Ross. He said, "That means that you can go out there and be with that mob and it is almost humdrum" (Recorded conversation, 7 October 2012). He said that the Boab Network matured in the time since the first Majaddin trip and so did our relationship with the Mowanjum people. Ross said that the highlight of this trip "was simply that there were no highlights!"

In contrast, I did not feel the same sense of ease that Ross felt, given that I had responsibility for the organisation of the journey, including that of trans-cultural relationships and looking to the needs of our Boab Network participants. My learning also involved the extraordinary comradeship with Eddie. We were learning that comradeship comes by facing and

trying to work through problems together. We all had a hand in solving the problems that challenged us, though Eddie seemed to come up with more solutions than we did.

### **Growth in friendship**

As in previous trips, our “work” included relating as much as undertaking specific action. Lee-Anne noted that her relationship with the adults has certainly changed but added that none of the adults who came this time were well known to her. She met Eddie’s wife Edna for the first time during this trip. Lee-Anne said, “She is just such a beautiful lady; I really think that she is wonderful. It was lovely; I felt really privileged to talk to her and get to know her a bit” (Recorded conversation, 7 October 2012).

### **A relaxed and stress free environment**

The quality of relationships is marked by a relaxed and stress free feeling: the lightness of the journey. To say it was light did not mean that we were free of challenges. I noted in my journal:

We seemed to have broken down the original reservations that we felt with people that we did not know well, and my own friendship with Eddie had developed:

I began with helping Eddie again with the water pump. The fitting had come out and he was refitting it. This time it was a straightforward task. It was a relaxed and easy time after breakfast. We were joking over breakfast that we would say to the bus manager who owns the hire car that the *Jillinga* (female spirit) took the keys. This led to a series of funny statements. I note the change in relationship as Marion and her daughter have got to know us. This has led to easy and relaxed conversations often tinged with laughter (Personal journal, October, 2012).

### **Food and general organisation**

Over time we learnt to approach food and general organisation differently. Ross commented on the changes that occurred since the initial trip to Cone Bay involving the Boab Network in 2009 (Recorded conversation, 14 October 2012). In the Network’s first *up-country* trip, we cooked for everyone. We adopted a colonialist approach by cooking in big pots. When the food was ready and cooked, everyone lined up and the *kardia* served out the food as the people filed past. As Ross added, “You couldn’t imagine a more graphic description of our relationship. It was us cooking for them and dealing out to them. They just went away and ate”. It is clear that

the Mowanjum people followed this lead without resistance. Is this gratitude or accepting our patronising approach as part of our culture?

The following year in the 2010 journey to Majaddin, Ross wanted to change our approach to meal arrangements in light of his experience at Cone Bay. He talked to the non-Aboriginal people involved in the Majaddin trip and suggested a different approach, less white controlled. But even then, we still could not achieve a significant change because non-Aboriginal people still controlled the food organisation and preparation. For our 2011 camp at Poulton Pool, we wanted to see equality and sharing in the cooking arrangements. We organised the food, but then handed it out to every family at the beginning. They were not given any instruction other than that it had to last the week. The people determined how this food should be prepared. As Ross recounted, “For the first time we got a fairly uniform spread of responsibility for cooking and providing the food”. We supplemented the food we brought with fish and other catches from the creek, which were cooked as well as the damper.

The 2012 Majaddin trip differed from previous trips. Organisation of the food was not in our control. We had two separate camps with their camp-fires: a Bear family camp and a rangers’ camp. We in the Bear family camp cooked together supervised by Marion Bear. The kids pitched in too. We did not discuss who would do what; people just did what was necessary. To summarise, we had learnt through successive camps that the less control we have the better, and our intention should be to organise ourselves out of a job! This is consistent with PAR, which is to learn from experience and change our actions accordingly.

## **6.7 Effective action requires good communication**

Effective action requires healthy and appropriate relating, but in turn healthy relating requires good communication. Such communication is not easy because, as trans-cultural community worker Richard Trudgen explains (2000, p. 113), contrasting world views have a significant impact on communication. He argues that poor communication is a central factor in the health crisis confronting the Yolŋu people. The Yolŋu become highly frustrated when health professionals are unable to share information from the dominant culture in a way that they understand and many blame themselves for this lack of understanding. Linguist Farzad Sharifian (2009) also notes that there are significant cultural differences that can affect intercultural conversations. He quotes a number of examples in which Aboriginal people speak of spirits or healing at a distance in ways that are alien to Western understanding. The difference between two systems of communication has been noted by linguists researching legal and classroom interactions. For example, Diana Eades (2003) investigated the case of an Aboriginal woman

gaoled for murder. It was clear that many facts in the case were overlooked because of communication difficulties. As Eades states, “But just because Aboriginal English speakers share a lot of grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation with other Australians, this does not mean that people always understand each other” (p. 1112). Eades (2013) elaborates on the misunderstanding that can arise when Aboriginal people speak Aboriginal English instead of their traditional languages. This is the case at Mowanjum, and it arises because many cannot speak their traditional language and all that remains of it is in the structure of Aboriginal English. She argues that it is important to understand the context, which includes my relationship with the other person, cultural expectations and norms (p. 48).

The issue of silence is also very pertinent. Ilana Mushin and Rod Gardner (2009) write of silence as a natural part of conversation and in this respect part of the talk. Eades (2013) writes of the issue of silence in the courtroom, concerned that witnesses are often silenced by judges and prosecutors ignorant of their culture and conversation styles. Rather than accepting that silences are a natural part of Aboriginal conversation, witnesses are subjected to interruption that destroys this conversational flow. This observation is pertinent to our interaction, and the way in which we seek to control the outcome. Silence is necessary because it gives Aboriginal people the time to interpret our questions and to give appropriate answers. These issues of time, and of relationship together with silence, are evident in the following incidents which occurred at Majaddin.

For example, Ross indicated that he would like to have revisited the Grasshopper Dreaming site, but the Elders met his requests with silence and the visit did not happen (Recorded conversation, 7 October 2012). Fortunately we were able to talk with the people behind the scenes and find out why. The simple reason was that it is an inappropriate place for the children and is dangerous. Another example was Katie’s request that she film Eddie on his land. Again Eddie met this request with silence. Although it would have been better from an artistic point of view to film Eddie on land, he was obviously uncomfortable with this. We were not able to resolve the matter and kept putting it off. In the end, we resolved the matter with the suggestion that we ask him and his brother Vince for an interview at Mowanjum. On reflection, I noted that we resolved both issues through conversations between Eddie and me privately at the right time. Thus, time is not determined by the clock but by other factors which may simply be expressed as “when it feels right”. The example also affirms what Eades (2003) has noted: “Aboriginal societies in Australia function on the basis of small-scale interaction between people who know each other and are often related to each other. Information or knowledge is often not freely accessible” (p. 1117).

In one instance, people communicated by throwing food. Katie shared that someone threw a bit of food at her when she was filming at sundown. This is the time when the spirits were around, so filming was unwelcome. Like other forms of recording, films are intrusive to the spirit of the camp and have to be handled carefully. I spoke with Katie later about this incident and she shared that she experienced three kinds of communication (Recorded conversation, 9 July 2013). The first was having meat thrown at her, but she did not understand what this meant until one of the girls came to her the next day, saying “Did someone throw something at you last night?” Katie replied “Yes”, and the girl asked, “Were you filming?” The girl then told Katie that you do not film here. Then in a third communication, when an adult told her that you do not film here, she asked why. She was told that “You don’t know what you will record”. Ironically, when she later went to Yalun and applied the same logic, namely not to film at night, she was told it was all right. Obviously Katie had learnt from this incident and was careful to ask before she acted.

I became aware of implications of breakdowns in communication because they had the potential to affect if not destroy relationships. They also could endanger people because the Kimberley terrain can be harsh and unforgiving. This was evident when we “lost” one of our cars. Eddie had led the way to the river through “wild” and difficult to navigate country. On the return journey, one of our vehicles went back and we felt that we had lost them. Unbeknownst to us they had a flat tyre. Eddie was understandably worried because he felt responsible for the children on board the “lost” *troupe*. We determined, on reflection, that we would always stay with another car in the future, and that it would be good to have a two way radio. We also became aware of the need to establish a protocol for such journeys in the future. On one occasion, a member of our party had wandered off from the camp. Eddie shared later that he was concerned to see the person alone in a creek bed. He reminded me of dangers on the land, which included snakes, wild pigs and bulls. We determined that we must ensure that people are properly briefed in the future and that no one walks away from the camp without company and without permission. I felt responsible for not warning one of the Boab participants, but Eddie added, “Both sides were wrong. I should have said, “No you shouldn’t go” (Recorded conversation, 8 October 2012). This was an important sharing because it reminded me of safety issues and the importance of communication: of checking with our host, and of communication with participants. As Eddie said, “We got to look after people when they come here. When they come to our land, we got to make sure that they OK”.

Thus the issue of communication is wide, ranging from the need to establish good relationships with the people, thus engendering effective action, but also for health and safety issues on future collaborative encounters. This concern to understand each other becomes

extremely important when travelling together on country. As the above stories illustrate, the risk of miscommunication is high and could have serious implications, including the loss of life.

## 6.8 Working with children and youth

I have argued that effective action is based on appropriate relating. This is particularly true for our work with children and youth, which means understanding their world view. As Trudgen states (2000, p. 97), understanding an Aboriginal person's world view is as important as language. He is referring to those responding to health issues, but the comment also stands for those relating to children. The Boab Network continually reflects (and at times agonises) on its experience with the children and youth, both *up-country*, at Mowanjum and when they travel to Perth. This is praxis: the reflection on practice in terms of our shared and different values. In this respect, people like Lee-Anne feel the urgent need to help some particularly troubled kids in this community. The Boab Network was asked to respond to the crisis affecting the youth at a time of high numbers of suicide. In a sense this crisis remains and, as Lee-Anne shared, there are children who remain susceptible:

I think back over the past five years and I can think of some other kids who were similar five years ago. Now they are on the grog and they are running amuck. And I think, "Are we going to lose these ones too?" We have to act fast but I don't know what we have to do. The best that we can do is to stay involved, to keep coming back to show them that they are important enough to us that we want to continue the relationship. We are not to cut off contact with any of them even if they have been revolting, obnoxious. We have to keep relating to them to show them that they are important and valued to us in the hope that they might value themselves (Recorded conversation, 7 October 2012).

An important aspect of our praxis is to understand and to accept responsibility. We are keenly aware of the considerable responsibility that is given to us as we take children swimming when there is no Aboriginal adult present. Ross was very aware of this:

It is scary because of issues such as payback and all that sort of stuff. So and you might have noticed out at Majaddin the second time, I took the kids off into the bush by myself. I had no other adult Mowanjum male or person. So we *kardias* took the kids off and we really didn't ask about that. We just did it and no-one said anything because it is assumed that we are able to do that sort of stuff now. I am really pleased that we have got to that stage. It shows that we are accepted and respected by them.

And that they know that we know enough about their culture to be able to operate within it (Recorded conversation, 14 October 2012).

I was aware of what Ross had said about taking responsibility and thought that I would check this out. I asked Eddie: “Was that OK from your point of view?” Eddie agreed that “Ross was really good with the kids and the mob there. They were good. I think that they continue to do that when they go out there” (Recorded conversation, 8 October 2012). I commented that Ross wondered if he took too much liberty. I recounted the day in which Eddie had taken Marion and me on a half day journey to search for a cycad plantation. In the meantime, Ross had returned to camp with the children but then decided to go swimming again. Eddie shared that it surprised him to find the children missing and in retrospect it would have been better for Ross to wait for Eddie to return before taking the children swimming for the second time.

To accept responsibility is also to be alert to cultural protocols. For example, Eddie shared his concern that the children did not breach protocol and “muck around with stuff like the Wandjina thing. I told them not to muck around with long necked turtle”. He had mentioned this concern when we began because young children were not allowed to catch this creature. Knowing this, it was important not to create a situation where this might happen, such as me catching one and unknowingly being a role model.

## **6.9 Creative Endeavour with the children**

We intentionally wanted to include a creative dimension in our work with children. The trip to Poulton Pool in October 2011 incorporated significant creative opportunities, particularly for the children. In terms of praxis, we noted that a number of children started paintings, beginning what hopefully will be a new generation of artists. We wanted to continue this emphasis on arts and creative expression in the current trip. With permission, we included Tessa, an emerging visual artist who has significant talent for drawing and painting, and Katie, who has expertise in video and photography.

This journey had been significant for Katie’s ongoing work with the Mowanjum community. Katie has been nurturing Mowanjum children and youth with camera and video and this journey to Majaddin was an opportunity to continue nurturing this relationship. As Katie had commented to me following the trip. She saw the Majaddin trip as a success in terms of the archive project and youth engagement with technology. This was one further opportunity to engage in creative ways with children and youth. I later asked Katie what it was like for her to work out bush in that creative way. She replied:



I think, it is wonderful to be able to hand over a camera and let them be empowered to take photos and take decisions. You only have to show them a few functions and they run with it. And knowing that they are documenting it and it is feeding back into their archives. So I think that it is empowering (Recorded conversation, 9 July 2013).

Katie's approach illustrates the value of collaborating with the youth in a creative and empowering way. She comes from a teaching background:

...where everything is controlled you know to the point where the kids line up at the door. And coming here where you can't teach like that. You have to completely change your ways and you can't force that on people which is why I have an open door policy. I guess that it is the same out the bush, you can't force them to pick up the camera but if you say here's a camera, here's how it works, you can pick it up or not pick it up. And what I find that they generally do and they take much more interesting insightful photos that I could ever get. They go to their family and take family photos.

Her collaborative approach was exemplified by enabling the children to create a video entitled *Bush boy strikes again*. The video was completely unplanned. It took about forty minutes to produce and the children were the camerapersons, actors and producers. Katie said to the producer that they had to get everybody reading, and they really did that themselves. Katie edited the material on site, which she did that night. It was important because she knew that Eddie Bear would finally understand why she was there. Although Eddie had been consulted about Katie coming to Majaddin, he did not realise what her role might be with the children.

One of the stranger lessons about the camera occurred on the return journey. Katie was stuck on Magpie *Jump-up* and trying to release the car. One of the boys picked up a camera and started shooting. Katie states:

And I was under the car and pulling out rocks. It was like, I have to get this car out. And he just took a photo and said, "How does it feel?" He was holding a camera up to me as I was doing the work. It was interesting that I knew what he was saying. But I took that as an observation, I didn't take that as an insult or anything. I thought, maybe I have to be careful about when I shoot and who I shoot.

This was an extraordinary moment for Katie, and certainly would influence her future use of the camera with Aboriginal people. Elsewhere I have discussed the people's sensitivity to

photographing the caves. This incident raises an equally problematic issue, namely the effect of photographing people. Susan Sontag's (2008) seminal discussion on taking photographs offers insight into this encounter. She argues that "Taking photos has also set up a chronic voyeuristic relation to the world which levels the meaning of all events" (p. 11). But worse, the camera is a "predatory weapon—one that's as automated as possible, ready to spring" (p. 14). Taking a picture is an event itself which may interfere with, invade or ignore what is really happening in the relationship. The photographer by taking the photo seeks to confer on the event "a kind of immortality (and importance) it would never otherwise have enjoyed" (p. 15). Jane Lydon (2005) discusses the photographing of Victorian Aboriginal people at Coranderrk from the mid-nineteenth century to early twentieth century. However, Lydon notes that this photographic record not only illustrates the white government's success in controlling Aboriginal people but "yields evidence of an ambiguous intimate relationship between black and white, reflecting a fascination with difference and a greater role for the Aboriginal subjects than has been recognized" (p. 32). However, such a record also created a "narrative of displacement and extinction that determined how Aboriginal people were governed". In other words, photography of Aboriginal people even if undertaken in a congenial relationship raises sensitive and troublesome issues revealed in this encounter at Magpie *Jump-up*. Certainly, permission needs to be sought from an Aboriginal subject, but even then I wonder if it is best Aboriginal people record such *up-country* visits in the light of these issues.

Tessa McOnie also engaged the children in a creative way. She had taken a large art book and invited the children to put their images in the book alongside hers. I talked with Tessa after the journey (Recorded conversation, 8 October, 2012). As Tessa recounted, "It was really cool to look at this book and to find that so many pages were coloured in". She continued to show me what the girls had drawn in the book including experiments with coloured pencils. As Tessa said, "They are like sponges; if they see something and they know how it is done they are willing to give it a go. They were like bees to honey. If I started drawing I would look up five minutes later and there were ten near me".

Tessa shared that she felt privileged to be invited to Majaddin and absolutely loved it. In her words, "I did so much and learnt so much. Every minute of every day there was something new to be learnt". Her sharing enabled me to understand collaboration in an even wider perspective than I had before. Being the keen observer, she would be attentive to what was occurring in the camp. A critical moment was when Katie was working on her video. Tessa said:

I wish I could have had a camera there; it was something to record that because that was such a heart warming thing to see. There were sixteen to eighteen kids piled on one another around this tiny little laptop in the middle of nowhere watching this one minute film. Time after time, they watched it about ten times. They loved it. And so to see them all collaborate with that; that was really lovely.

It seemed in this case that collaboration was happening in very natural and creative ways – a total community happening rather than simply between two individuals or two groups. I also experienced the value of art when Katie had her second flat tyre out bush. The kids were reacting badly, with two girls involved in a fight. Tessa related her part in this event: “I used art when we were under intense strain. Even the girl who was most affected had her little ear fixed on it. That was quite a profound moment really because I didn’t know how they would respond”. Tessa told me that there were three girls, onlookers who were not part of the fight. They did not like conflicts, so they were a little bit shaky and were disturbed by what happened. These girls needed a distraction, so they went straight into the drawing. They then helped all of the other girls to express their feelings in the drawing. Tessa asked them to draw how they felt and they drew their emotions such as a sad face. Tessa expressed her feelings of confusion by drawing a coloured circle. The girls saw that and said, “How did you do that?” Namely, how did Tessa do her drawing. They were interested in the colour, so Tessa invited them all to have a go. Tessa showed me the following image (Figure 47), which was completed out on the track when they were under stress. I responded, “Wow! So that’s your combined work. That’s a group response and that is why it hit me so strongly”. Tessa stated that it had to be a group because they were all feeling the same: “I don’t think you should be isolated in how you feel”. I noted that it was an image that expressed the bonding of the moment. As Tessa continued, “The fastest way to heal yourself is to have others around dealing with the issues at the same time. Girls like to feel that they are not on the boat themselves”.



Figure 47: Group drawing under stress

I asked Tessa how she found working with art in this environment. She stated that it definitely widened her understanding of what it meant to work with art and kids. It was not possible to have this opportunity to work with them at Mowanjum. It would mean that you would have to follow them around. They were isolated, out in the bush and with no sugar. They were also affected by this beautiful country, and, of course, made their impact on it. She learnt by observing what they did. As she related: “Every time a kid put pen to paper, it doesn’t matter what they draw or whether it was writing it means something. So I just thought that I would let them go for it. And I can look back and the more that they put pen to paper the more they progressed. It was almost like the study of the kids and the art”.

Although, we are mindful of Eddie’s substantial role in determining what actions we might take at Majaddin, we also (with his permission) wanted to bring a creative dimension to our work with the children *up-country*. As I reflected on Katie and Tessa’s account of this creative activity, I used summary words like empowering, enabling, self-expression, healing, uncontrolling and going with the flow. Their creative work had built on what we had done at Poulton Pool which resulted in an extraordinary creative response from the children and certainly demonstrate a desire for human flourishing, a key dimension of Participatory Action Research.

## 6.10 Vision for the future

I have described three key areas of action: practical, the nurture of relationships and creativity. By taking responsibility for the children, we were making a practical contribution to Eddie's family as they returned to land as well as nurturing relationships with the children and the adults. We also added a creative dimension to open up possibilities for future collaborations. The other key action was that of organisation. Apart from taking a key role in organising the trip together with Eddie, we assisted with the people's long term connection with Majaddin. This is a form of political engagement consistent with PAR. Kenneth and Mary Gergen (2008) note: "Action researchers have viewed themselves as politically engaged since the very inception of such endeavour" (p. 164). As I have argued throughout this thesis, land rights and the need to return to land are significant political issues for the people of Mowanjum.

Gergen and Gergen (2008) state that the task of the action researcher is not to describe the world as it is, "but to realize the visions of what the world can become" (p. 167). One of the significant moments of this trip was when Eddie physically showed us where the new community would be developed at Majaddin. Eddie took Ross and me aside to walk in the area proposed for the central community. He shared the history of Majaddin together with his vision for the future as he pointed out the features of the place (Recorded conversation, 4 October 2012). The resettlement of Majaddin began decades ago with the vision of one of the "old ones". Eddie's uncle, his father's cousin, wanted to build a house in this area. At first Eddie wanted to build the community on the black soil over the track, but decided that it would be best to follow the lead of his uncle. The family marked out the area in the mid 1990s and with a surveyor established plans for the future. Eddie first investigated the area in 1994. Then in 1996 Steve Smith built the storage facility, leaving his name engraved on the floor.

Eddie said that the envisaged community will include three houses with a school and a school teacher's house. The inclusion of a school will illustrate the importance of education to the Majaddin families. They, like many people in Mowanjum, are concerned that school attendance has been poor. Children are bored by a Western based education program removed from land and culture. A school at Majaddin has the potential to provide the best of both mainstream and Aboriginal education.

Eddie pointed to the top of a rock outcrop. They will install a water tank on the top. The new community will have a generator, though perhaps a case could be argued for an up-market green energy town. Eddie pointed to another area to be developed for the pensioner quarters and the basketball court, not that the pensioners will be the ones playing basketball! Over the track

near the court will be a camping place for tourists. And on flat ground will be a small airstrip with a larger airstrip further away.

I responded to Eddie's story by saying that it feels good to be part of something that could extend into the future. Eddie replied, "Before I go I will make sure that this happens". I hope that he will have the time and energy for this to occur. It would be an important legacy for Mowanjum families. I asked Eddie what it meant to be looking at a town in the making. He replied:

It will be great. We have come this far. We are doing it for the old people we are doing it for them and we are right here with them. We even have our children with them. When we first arrive at Majaddin we should be singing out to the old ones. We need to tell them that we are here. When we first came, my mum sang out. She was married to dad and she sang out, "We have come home now. We coming home and we bring all the *illela*, that's all the kids with us". We say, your *baba baba*, your grandfather, and *giana*, that's your grannie, all that and *kieni*, uncle.



Figure 48: Eddie Bear talking with Ross Gobby about his vision for the future

I have since noted the tension between the dreamer and the pragmatist. Eddie, like me, is a dreamer and sees the possibilities for the future. In later conversations with Ross, I have also had

to consider the cold reality of the situation. It will take substantial money to develop such a community. Is this cost viable given its remoteness and the fact that there are few like Eddie able to sustain the vision? I am also painfully aware of the tensions inherent in the *Ngarinyin* community, as individuals fight each other and those who might offer resources to the situation. I note the interesting change that has occurred and is occurring. In the past, whites such as the missionaries took responsibility to develop the community and its infrastructure. Now Indigenous people are taking responsibility to develop their own *up-country* communities.

However, the greatest threat to Eddie's vision comes from recent changes in federal government policy. In July 2013 I spoke with staff at the Indigenous Coordination Centre in Derby. They informed me that the Commonwealth does not support small communities developing new outstations and is reducing its support for many existing communities. The WA state government also does not offer support. Eddie's family will have to look elsewhere for their funding, which may prove difficult not only in initial development, but also in future maintenance. Despite this, it is important for the people to continue to develop some resources at Majaddin, if only to preserve their native title rights. This means that programs such as the IPA (Indigenous Protected Area) become extremely important. This is a new program which has possibilities not only for Kimberley Aboriginal communities. As Aboriginal researcher and critic Marcia Langton, together with Zane Ma Rhea and Lisa Palmer (2005) assert, it can impact other Aboriginal communities in Australia. A key point is that traditional Aboriginal practice honours diversity rather than a standardisation of resources. This diversity is affirmed through dance, song, painting, and story as the people relate to the environment in all of its ecological complexity.

### **6.11 Action Research and the IPA program**

In chapter 4 I introduced the idea that we are allies in a long trans-cultural alliance concerned with land rights and the return to traditional lands. I was therefore very glad when Sam Bayley, who has responsibility for the Indigenous Protected Area proposal to the *Ngarinyin* people, asked me to help organise and support a meeting with Eddie and his family at Majaddin. I would take notes on Ngarinyin ranger Robin Dann's presentation to the Bear family and about the decisions that they might make from this presentation. My contribution was not to pre-empt their thinking on the matter, but to ask questions that would enable them to clarify their future needs. This was an important part of the Action Research because it was a small contribution toward the realisation of their future dreams. Sam spoke of what it meant to develop the Indigenous Protected Area and Healthy Country Plans with the *Ngarinyin* people. He said that it was difficult because so many clans and families were involved. He could not do it on his own. He said, "If I could tell

you about the program that I was developing or working with the mob on, we could then work collaboratively”. It was therefore important to get the Boab Network involved. Sam said, “It gave the program a bit more kudos because other people were talking about the benefits to country. It meant that I didn’t have to be out there all the time, in spreading myself more thinly” (Recorded conversation, 9 July 2013).

When Eddie was ready, we began our meeting on the meaning and implications of the IPA agreement for the people of Majaddin. Later in the day we met again and the Bear family drafted a list to accompany the notes. This list of possible IPA assistance included the grading of a road to Majaddin, eradication of the pigs, perhaps help with a bus for transport and fencing the site. I found this to be an amazing opportunity to be part of a conversation of momentous worth in preparation for further discussions about the IPA. It was important for Sam that I did this because the people have had questions thrown at them many times and “this means that through our networks and working together there is less stress on him (Eddie) and his family” (Recorded conversation, 9 July 2013).

The IPA has the potential for any part of *Wilinggin* country but can fit best on exclusive native title areas like Majaddin, Pantijan or Munja. In these countries, no one else manages the country. However the IPA can also be set up on Indigenous pastoral stations, national parks and on non-Indigenous pastoral stations subject to their agreement. The critical aspect of the IPA is that it helps Indigenous peoples of the Kimberley to achieve a vision for the future. In this vision, *Ngarinyin* people are in control, as independent and recognised in the wider scheme. Cultural knowledge is strong through the teaching of the young and engagement with land using traditional practices. There will be tangible jobs on country and with the formation of viable economies. As the Kimberley comes under increasing pressure from tourists, the *Ngarinyin* people have the opportunity not only to control the access to their land and their cultural sites, but to capitalise on the tourist interest. From the wider perspective of a creative relationship to a vulnerable landscape, the people can instigate a strategy for care and protection of the land, its wildlife and bush tucker as well as appropriate fire management and feral control.

## **6.12 Action research and return to country**

I spoke with *Ngarinyin* ranger Robin Dann at Majaddin following the meeting (Recorded conversation, 4 October 2012). He confirmed the importance of this return to land:

The land and the people they are one. Like us mob, we young fellas we got – how do you say it – to be responsible and take the responsibility of looking after land. What



our ancestors are doing for the last one hundred thousand years. And this job I am doing it's the same for the ranger work, for conservation and land management sort of same as before back in the days when our old people were looking after country. To respect the land and look after land but the land will look after them. It provided food, wild life, big mob wild life. Back in them days you wouldn't have had to walk far to get a kangaroo or something. Now you have to drive for miles, relate to pastoralists, fire, roads.

Robin spoke of the larger collaboration between the rangers and various non-Indigenous groups: "We got two way learning, the old way what the old people done it in the past and we got this white man way with science and technology and all of that. The aim is to keep the country healthy; if the country is healthy then people are healthy". This two way learning involves Robin giving the bush name while scientists provide the scientific names. For Robin, the ranger program is "one of the best things that has happened in the Kimberley. They call it the Kimberley Ranger program now... cause you have people from there working there. You get educated paid, doing what their ancestors were doing long time".

Later in our conversation I spoke of coming as guests into Eddie's country. I asked Robin why he was so passionate about this. Robin reminded me that he was passionate about being in control of his county: "Well I see the Indigenous Protected Area, I told you the other word for it 'blackfella national park'. Well it is your country; you control it you manage it without outside people telling you what to do. They can come and help, but they have to listen to you".

## **6.13 Conclusion**

The return journey to Majaddin was certainly a collaboration. Members of the Boab Network supported Eddie's family as they returned to land by caring for the children and youth. We also physically assisted Eddie with plumbing and other concerns, and contributed to the IPA meeting. I became aware that my research fitted under a PAR framework, with action arising from a long term relationship. However, the fundamental question of my thesis seemed to change from what it means to collaborate, to what it means to undertake research with and in an Aboriginal community. It was as though I had applied an "early season burn" on my work.

I have argued that my research is an example of Participatory Action Research, though my focus is as much on relating as any emergent actions. As I have observed, appropriate actions follow from the relating and the learning. This is consistent with the theory presented by Indigenous researcher Karen Martin (2008) where action follows from knowing which comes

through the Law and in relationship with the land and being or relating to the land and with the creatures of the land.

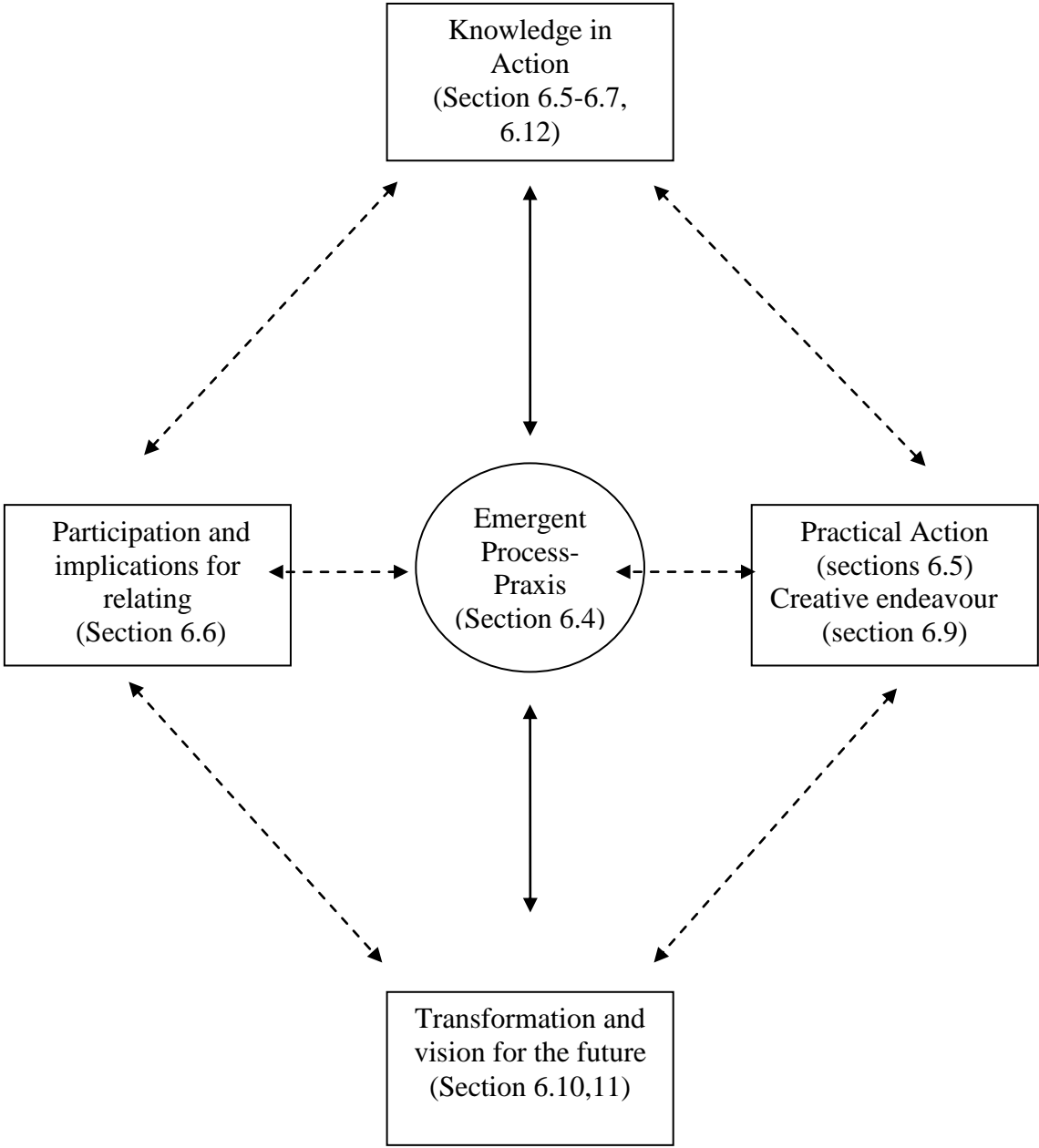


Figure 49: An action research model

The diagram above (Figure 49) follows Reason and Bradbury’s (2008) characteristics of Action Research (p. 5) with an emergent process at its heart. The four dimensions include

participation, knowledge in action, practical action and transformation and vision for the future. My praxis has been to reflect continually on what it means to relate on land with Mowanjum families as we engaged in a collaborative relationship. I questioned whether the term collaboration was appropriate given the nature of this relationship. Participation, essential to PAR, implies both participating in the research but also encouraging others' participation. Accordingly, I have described my participation, or relating to both land and people, but also noted that I was following the needs and concerns of Eddie and his people. I argued in section 6.6 that the quality of our relating was vital to the effective actions that would follow. The visit to Majaddin was involved in practical action. On the one hand it gave Boab Network participants an opportunity to take what we had learnt and put into action. On the other hand it was concerned with practical actions as the Traditional Owners returned to their land. A vital part of this action was to explore creative opportunities with the children as artists such as Tessa and Katie engaged with them using visual art, photography and video. Our actions contribute to a larger vision as described, a vision for the future development of Majaddin and nurture of a healthy country. In this respect, we undertake Participatory Action Research.

I wrote in the Introduction to this thesis that I set off on a journey with no map, and indeed, that the map would emerge from my travels. As I have discovered, this map is incomplete, for I can only record a small portion of what I actually experienced. Gergen and Gergen (2008) speak of the fallacy of the traditional positivist program which endeavours to move toward "increasingly accurate accounts of the world" (p. 166). This attempt falls apart for many reasons including the limitation of language but also that of research methodology.

In my journeys including the 2012 Majaddin trip I could not be objective. I was a participant fully engaged in a process of transformation and with Eddie taking a step toward the future that he has outlined. In this sense, I agree with the Gergens that it is not about mapping but about world making. In this process I have affirmed that a Participatory Action Research approach is very pertinent to my research, despite reservations which I will discuss in chapter 7.

The Gergens also speak of the difference between theory and practice. It is not a matter of finding a theory, some generalisation that is applicable to other situations and community. It is certainly not about finding a theory that could be detached from the experience. Through reflection on the experience in all of its complexity (the praxis), we arrive at the values and general guidelines that will affect the actions of the Boab Network in the future. This further work is outlined in chapter 7, noting the natural movement from the personal to the network. I may have begun this involvement with Mowanjum as a personal experience, but it has opened up into

being part of a larger network, indeed two networks in collaboration: the Mowanjum community and the Boab Network with its backing in the Floreat Uniting Church.

## Chapter 7:

### Bringing it together

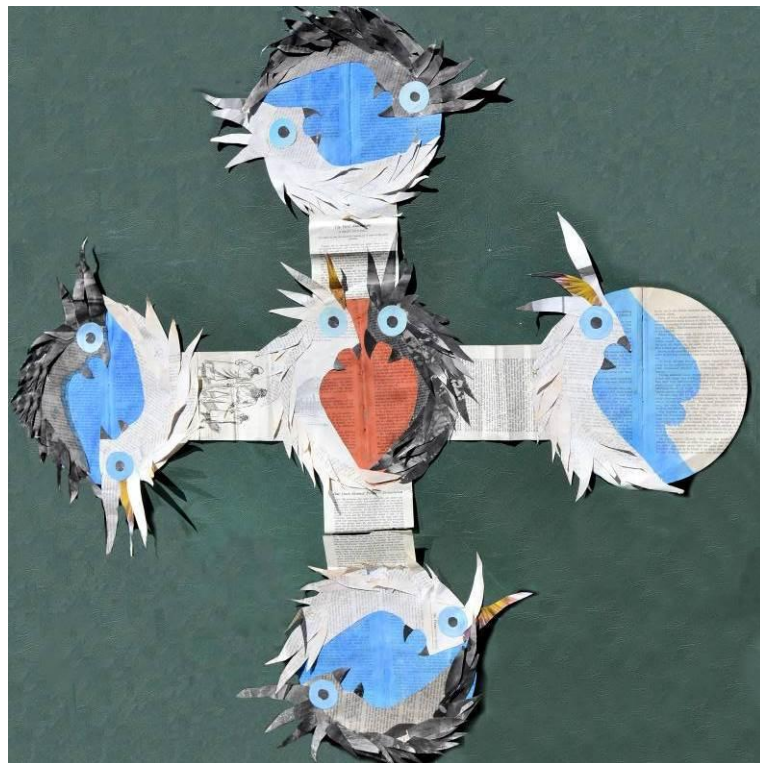


Figure 50: The big picture

## 7.1 Introduction

My task in this chapter is to integrate learning from the four *up-country* journeys. I use the term integrate because these four journeys and almost a decade of relating have affected me at all levels of my being – emotionally, physically, intellectually and spiritually. I began my formal research with the question: What does trans-cultural collaboration mean *up-country*, in particular on Aboriginal land? My friends from Mowanjum helped me to engage with this question as they invited me and others to partner with them in *up-country* journeys. However, as my reflections progressed I then framed another question: How does my approach to research fit within a Western academic framework, given that I had adopted a metaphor in keeping with an Aboriginal context (section 2.3)?

I now continue what I began in chapter six, namely to explore the implications of this enquiry for an academic research framework (sections 7.2-7.4). While my inquiry fits within a Participatory Action Research model, it is clear that it transcends the usual focus on action because it is concerned with what it means to be with people on land *relatingly*. I introduce a more specific approach to PAR under the terms Participatory, Embedded, Empathic, Response: PEER. My research process arose from an “embedded” relationship with the people and their land, and evolved within an “empathic” frame of reference. This is radically different from entering an Aboriginal community to undertake a particular form of PAR. An outcome of PEER is my response to the Mowanjum people, but also to that larger community in which I participate. I have seen my response, my “respons-ibility”, as needing to share my work with Elders in the Mowanjum community, the Boab Network, academia and the wider Australian community (sections 7.5- 7.9). The PEER model is best viewed as *a* way of relating and working with Aboriginal communities; I am not posing my approach to PEER as *the* way or even as one that can or should be replicated easily. Rather, the principles underpinning PEER are what underpin another way non-Indigenous people can relate with Indigenous communities in order to learn “deeply”.

## 7.2 Trans-cultural distance

My inquiry is fundamentally about the possibility and process of relating trans-culturally. In other words, I have entered that often contested and uneasy space where Western and Aboriginal epistemologies meet: Nakata’s (2007) cultural interface or Anzaldúa’s (1987) borderlands. This meeting can lead to a change of consciousness in order to accommodate this contested space. I recognise the significant distance and difference between my culture, including that of my peers in the Boab Network, and the people from Mowanjum. I have been careful not to

ignore this distance. I have also avoided the temptation to make definitive statements about the knowledge that I have gleaned, or even worse, to write a manual on how to relate to Aboriginal people. Such an approach would be like building a bridge between two diverse communities, Mowanjum and the university. Naomi Wolfe, the Academic Coordinator of the Jim-baa-yer Indigenous Higher Education Unit on the Victorian campuses of ACU, spoke to me of the difficulty of such an image. To speak of a bridge suggests permanence, stability, instrumentality and function. Such thinking avoids the place in-between and its depth! I could not build a permanent link between institutions such as a university and Aboriginal communities. It is difficult enough to sustain the relationship between Mowanjum and the Boab Network, which rests on a variety of relationships. Naomi suggested that a more appropriate image is the canoe crossing a river. A canoe crossing a river represents a fluid and transient relationship which is ever changing and cannot be taken for granted. Such a relationship grows and matures and

because of this is never fixed. For example, my role in the community and the Boab Network changed over time as people from both groups entrusted me with more complex issues. While I have tried to express this changing role and relationship in this thesis, my intention has not been to “institutionalise” such a relationship and to give it an “ulterior” purpose other than our engagement and deep listening. The image of the canoe suggests fluidity and impermanence, as well as fragility and limitation. I do not bring a container ship of knowledge back from such journeys. Rather, I bring glimpses of what I encountered, realising that my work cannot express the profound nature of such trans-cultural relationships to both land and people.

My experience of Mowanjum and travelling

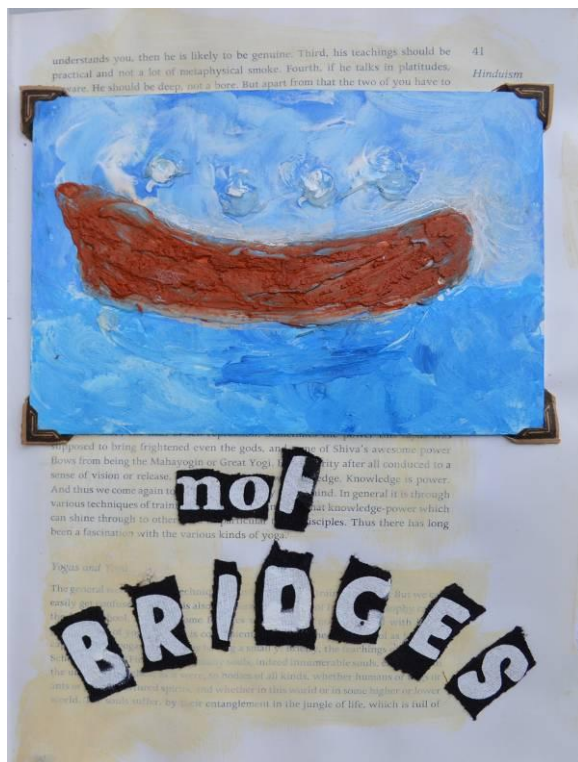


Figure 51: Canoes not bridges

with the people and with their culture cannot be easily adapted to an academic institution. In any case, I fear that such a relationship would be dominated by the more powerful body, namely the Western institution, and therefore kill the subtlety and life-giving nature of relating. With this in mind, I present PEER, which aims to integrate my learning and emergent research process.

### 7.3 From PAR to PEER

Through my journeys with Aboriginal people, I have experienced an Aboriginal culture and ontology which is radically different from my own. These experiences incorporated or led to actions which form part of my research, along with my experience of trans-cultural relating. My task is to discuss this experience within a Western philosophical approach to knowing. My research journey resonates with a Participatory Qualitative Research in general and Participatory Action Research in particular. Psychologist Peter Kral (2014), for example, argues that the relationship between the researcher and those researched needs closer attention. He reviews recent approaches to research in Canadian Indigenous communities, noting their collaborative/participatory processes. Belgium educationalists Caroline Vanderkinderen, Griet Roets & Geert Van Hove (2014) argue that the ethical base underlying such research is also relational, which in turn is related to an ethics of care. They argue that the research relationship must include care for the Other as well as care for one's self. For this to occur it is vital that the researcher appreciate the culture and particular ethos of the Other, allowing him/herself to be transformed by this relating.

However, there are key issues of focus, particularly when it comes to relating, participation and understanding my philosophical underpinnings. For example, PAR assumes a formalised approach to gaining the participation of a group or community who have particular problems to be solved. As Park (2001) argues, people engage in three kinds of activity: inquiry into the nature of a problem, organising possible collective responses and raising awareness on moral and political grounds (p. 81). My approach to participation has been less formal. I did not seek to solve problems or introduce predetermined actions, mine or the Mowanjam people's. I certainly did not set out to change another community. I discovered that simply being with the people on their land is a form of intentional action and my resultant actions were more a response to the people and their concerns rather than initiatives to bring about intentional or planned change.

PAR is based on participation, and as such includes relating. Insensitively applied, however, it can end up as a three dimensional framework, namely that of participation, of emergent process and of action. In essence, this can lead to a focus on action which leaves out the need to integrate the various aspects of my relating: not only between myself and the other, but within my thinking, sensate, feeling and intuitive sides. In other words, to focus simply on action does not assume the need for a change of consciousness or take into account the impact of a change in consciousness as the study progressed. PAR seems to place inordinate focus on action,



fuelled by an awareness of a problem to be solved. Orlando Fals Borda (2001) writes of the history of Participatory Action Research, quoting Francis Bacon as the philosopher who had concerns for practical results: “In natural philosophy, practical results are not only a way to improve conditions but also a guarantee for truth” (p. 30). Fals Borda and others, therefore, question the “fashionable meta-narratives” of contemporary social research and discard their learned jargon in favour of engaging in a “practical struggle for social transformation” (p. 29). I commend this approach, particularly with research with an Aboriginal community. However, I have difficulty with PAR’s focus on action and the practical. I have found resonance in the work of eighteenth/nineteenth century German writer and scientist Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. He, like Francis Bacon before him, reacted to those whose world was “orchestrated by fixed mathematical formulas and driven by strict mechanistic principles” (Rifkin, 2010, p. 308). But Goethe argued from a different perspective, namely that of participatory relationship (Rifkin, 2010, p. 608). He argued for a delicate empiricism in which the researcher seeks to become one with the object of inquiry, where theory emerges from this participatory relating. Goethe, in advocating this delicate empiricism, does not seek to make of “ourselves, as it were, masters and possessors of nature” (Descartes, quoted by John Shotter, 2005, p. 142).

Henri Bortoft (1996), for instance, quotes Carolyn Merchant, who says of Bacon that his scientific methodology derives from the courtroom “because it treats nature as a female to be tortured through mechanical interventions” (p. 243). There is a residue of the witch trials in this way of thought. This led to a science of power over nature, rather than relating with nature. It also suggests control and manipulation, which is a danger when applying a Western based PAR methodology in an Aboriginal setting. In contrast, Goethe’s “delicate empiricism” is an emergent and participatory methodology, which seeks to relate intuitively and “delicately” with nature, or in my case with the people of Mowanjumb.

Goethe’s world is also emergent and therefore transitory, defeating the quest to find theories that apply universally. John Shotter (2005), based on Goethe’s perspective, argues that “all such meetings, i.e. entanglements, intertwinings, or chiasmically structured events, are not only uniquely related to the context of their occurrence, but they also have the quality of passing or transitory events” (p. 137). This is not a matter of finding an answer to a question of being, but of becoming. Goethe did not want to impose theory between the phenomenon observed, but to see it directly in its own ground (Kaplan, 2005, p. 318). In this respect, I avoided bringing a Western theoretical framework to “guide” my inquiry. As Kaplan argues, I have engaged “in a free but focused, intelligent conversation” with no predetermined outcomes (p. 319).

Goethe sought an embodied experience, which is perhaps empathic. Rifkin (2010) argues that the “empathic impulse [is] embedded in embodied experience that includes not only human society but all of nature” (p. 309). Thus, as I will explain, taking appropriate action rests on the concept of empathic listening. This in turn incorporates deep listening (to both land and people) and compassion, in the sense of being connected to the land and feeling with the people as they express their longings for viable relationships to their land. My research, therefore, has arisen from this empathic listening at the invitation of Mowanjum people. I use the term PEER inquiry to distinguish my approach from those who lay stress on the pre-eminence of action over relating, of purposeful action which is integrated with relating. Although “participatory” does refer to relating, it can be approached as a formal requirement rather than an essence of the relating, affecting all subsequent actions. My inquiry is Participatory, Embedded, Empathic and Responsive to being with and relating to an Aboriginal community. Rather than use the term research, I have referred to this relating as an apprenticeship under the care and direction of my Aboriginal mentors, Donny Woolagoodja and Eddie Bear. They guided me to an appropriate and sensitive relating to the people and the land, as they helped me to understand their relating to the land. They also guided my being with their Elders and youth.

#### **7. 4 PEER inquiry**

PEER acknowledges both the act of being in relationship, as well as acts expressing the relating. As educationalists Joe Kincheloe and Shirley Steinberg (2008) argue, it is a learning process with the intent of transformation. I would add transformation both of oneself and the relating of which I am part. Such transformation “challenges the epistemological foundations of the ethnoknowledge known simply as science” (p. 152). Such a challenge naturally arises when methodological and ethical framework is embedded in the community and its relationship with the land as in PEER inquiry. A bonus of this acronym was the word “peer”. I realised that one of the important dimensions of my work and that of the Boab Network was the nurturing of trans-cultural peer relationships. This was particularly evident in chapter six as we returned to Majaddin and nurtured our long term relationship with Eddie Bear. It is now our aim to encourage and support younger people from the Boab Network and Mowanjum community to form trans-cultural relationships. They in turn lead to new thinking and the possibility of new collaborations. PEER enquiry includes four elements, derived from these journeys with Aboriginal people on their land: Participatory, Embedded, Empathic and Responsive.

## Participatory

The term participatory is not merely a methodological stance, but intentionally an ontological reality. Action researchers such as Patricia Wicks, Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury (2008) have an expansive understanding of the word participatory. They, like Kenneth and Mary Gergen (2008), see such research as grounding oneself in the participative, interdependent ecology of life with its personal, political and philosophical groundings. I too have been very aware of the importance of participation at all levels – including my participation in community concerns and issues, the involvement of key people in the research process and the way in which the inquiry is undertaken. As Keyan Tomaselli, Lauren Dyll and Michael Francis (2008) note, all participants are written into the encounter including their dialogue and subjectivities (p. 359).

Gergen and Gergen (2008) write of the connection between the theory of social construction and action research. The former is a “tradition of scholarship that traces the origin of knowledge, meaning or understanding to human relationships” (p. 160). Such an approach shifts the attention from an individual undertaking research to “co-ordinated relationships” (p. 163). This thinking is consistent with action research, which has “laid stress on processes of collaboration” and acknowledges pluralistic worlds with diverse views (p. 165). In undertaking collaborative relationships as we engaged in journeys *up-country*, I was a participant in a co-ordinated relationship which changed its nature when we met on traditional lands.

Although I have participated in the community of Mowanjum for over a decade, my formal research has been recent. I have been guided by the Chairman of the Mowanjum Council, Eddie Bear, who has substantially contributed both intentionally and unintentionally to my thinking. I have been a participant in a wider sense than my formal researcher role. I have participated in many community activities including helping to arrange an event to honour the centenary of the relationship between the Uniting and Presbyterian Churches and the Mowanjum community, and then officiating at a funeral for a young lad who suicided. Such participation led me to understand the importance of both an empathic approach to research and what it meant to see research as embedded in the community and emergent from relating to the people.

My inquiry has explored the nature of participation, defined by being a guest in a host/guest relationship, and ally in a long term alliance. To be a guest acknowledges that such participation can never be on an equal power basis. The relationship is mediated by obligations to and protocols of the host. To be an ally is to participate in a web of relating as the people take on the dominant culture in their struggle to survive. Such relating is defined by the justice issues

demanding by relating to Aboriginal people in a particular context. However, as I discovered in the journey to Poulton Pool, to participate also meant to relate to the land in ways consistent with Aboriginal relating. In so doing I was being prepared literally to stand with the people as they engaged with the land in their own way. This is radically different to participation in the land rights cause from afar. I was led further into relationship with the land as the land called to me through a dream (see below). This dream enabled me to appreciate what Goethe meant by participating. Goethe's approach to seeing is to understand how we take part in or participate in the act of seeing, namely, "as the way in which our own mind becomes organized temporarily" (Bortoft, 1996, p. 34). It is not knowing about something or someone; it is being a channel or container through which the Other can be known more fully. It is not simply that the Other participates in my inquiry, but rather I participate in the Other. This is a frightening and possibly confusing moment for many non-Indigenous people such as I, who have an ontology of separation and division.

Bortoft writes of the inquirer who "becomes the apparatus in which the phenomenon actualizes as a higher stage of itself" (p. 109). As noted in section 5.2, this is confirmed by much neuro-scientific research as in the case of mirror neurons. This comment speaks of a deeper sense of participating, in which I participate as part of the land, rather than the land being an object of my research. This is not a new thought. Aboriginal people such as those from Mowanjumb relate to a particular area of land and the spirits of the land (the *Wandjinas* and *Ungudds*) who guide a person through dreams and other experiences to bring new knowledge or insight. This insight may be expressed as songs, dances and paintings. The following story which occurred during my return visit to Majaddin in 2012 illustrates my being guided to a particular place. The story illustrates what Bortoft understands Goethe to mean by participating which means more than "just" being a participant with others in a research process. I see participating as being called into a relating with the land, and the people of the land. I literally became the instrument through which the land (or spirits of the land) drew me to itself.

I returned to Majaddin with Eddie Bear and his family to their *Ngarinyin* lands deep in the North West Kimberley and was deeply affected by the place. On the Thursday morning of the Majaddin trip, I had an extraordinary dream: I was shown a skeleton which had some flesh still on it. Nearby were the organs of the body. I had to search for these. As it turned out, this dream would underwrite my future relating with the country. The story continued as follows:

Eddie's way of relaxing and being with the country was to take Edna, Marion and me on a long journey to find an ancient grove of cycads. This certainly was an encounter

with land, and allowed me to experience the land both through his eyes and but also through mine. On the way Eddie showed me an ancient burial site. I was shown where they laid out the body within a pile of rocks. The elements would naturally dismember the corpse and over time it would be reduced to the bones. The bones would then be painted with ochre and laid out in somewhere like Grasshopper dreaming where we had experienced the bones on a previous trip (Personal Journal 2012).

The visit to the burial site was very consistent with the previous night's dream. I had dreamt that a man showed me these bones which still had a little bit of flesh on the feet. There were other bodily organs which were tucked away to be brought out later. I had mused on the dream since morning and now here was its meaning. I was shown the place where the bones were laid. There must be some other organs or experience tucked away. I followed the path and came across the most remarkable art on the wall of the cave. It was an amazing discovery which I showed to Eddie. I was not allowed to take a photo, thus observing the protocol of this sacred place, though the image is etched on my mind. In reflecting on this dream and the encounter with the grave and cave art, I felt that I was being led into a deeper relationship with the land and the spirits of the land. It was certainly an invitation to journey further with the land and its ongoing history.

The day ended well as we meditated on the setting sun. I returned to the experience of the dream and standing at the grave. I began to feel the depth of the dream when the old ones obviously came to me that previous night and invited me to stand at the grave and in a sense to be at a connection point. As I reflected on this dream, my praxis, I began to see its larger significance. I felt a vocation, a calling to continue to work for the protection and care of this land. I would have this opportunity as the people invited me to return and help them with a sensitive issue involving their lands and native title.

I later spoke with *Wilinggin* Elder Matt Martin about this dream. I said that I suddenly felt that the land was calling out to me. Matt replied, "That's what it is – you can feel it. And your dream, it's like come true. If you don't understand the meaning of the dream the spirit will bring you to it". I replied that is what it did. It is part of me now. Matt continued, "You are part of it and the spirit bring you into the place. Is that like what happens with the children, they are brought into the place. The spirit brings them in. Sometimes they have dreams but sometimes they have the spirit there". I certainly had felt that I was brought into the land through this dream and its aftermath; I had learnt the meaning of participating in an entirely new way. I then said to Matt that

all the *Wandjinas* in my house had their effect on me and they have brought me back here. He replied, “Well the first time that you go out you don’t understand but the spirit make you think. Bring the old man back [meaning me], they want them in the land. That’s *damban*; it’s like you’re born there” (Conversation, 10 July 2013).

Matt speaks of an energy which, if felt, can draw a person to the land. Mowaljarlai (1993) speaks of this energy as the *gi* (pronounced “ghee”). This energy can push a person away or attract (p. 67). Mowaljarlai also states that the *gi* is felt in the body, informing of a relative’s visit or sickness: “The Gi is telling her, instead of telephoning. The dream lets her know that her son or daughter is coming. If the son gets sick, or the daughter, her stomach is fluttering, or jump, jump, jump ...” (p. 70). Thus, as Mowaljarlai suggests, the empathic connection is both embedded in the land, but also in a person and her or his connection with the land.

This story and Matt’s response illustrates a unique quality of participating that I assume in PEER inquiry. I was invited into an embedded and empathic relating to the land and the people of the land. In other words, I am invited to feel for the land in a way that resonates with their feeling for and connection to the land. This in turn leads to responsive actions that continue to this present day.

## **Embedded**

My research practice, process and ethics should be consistent with an embedded relating to the land and the people of the land. I have therefore taken the view that the methodology and design should emerge from these *up-country* journeys. I began my research process with the intention that I would not use specific Western academic modalities of PAR methodology. I adopted a metaphor of setting a fire, hunting/gathering, cooking, travelling from one camp to another, sharing and the final early burn. Such methodology could easily be explained to my Aboriginal respondents. As I followed this process, I was taught what it meant to listen to the people and the land. My process led me to consider what it meant for my research to be embedded in the land and the people’s understanding of the land.

Lynn Meskell and Peter Pels (2005) use the phrase embedding ethics to question the practice of abstracting ethics from scholarly practice. Such abstraction is played out through an ethics committee which is external to the actual relationship between the archaeologist/anthropologist and Indigenous people and their lands. In contrast, Meskell and Pels argue for a principle which “embeds ethics in anthropological practice at the same time that it opens up anthropological practice to the negotiation of the interests of the audiences with which it

must deal”. The local Indigenous community is thus critical to this negotiation which is embedded in the “proper social, cultural, historical and epistemological place” (p. 3).

## **Empathic**

I saw that research needed an empathic awareness if I were to relate fully and participate in communities with radically different cultural and philosophical assumptions from my own. My society and culture is focussed on the primacy of an individual *self* rather than on inter-relationship of *selves*. According to Kenneth Gergen (2009), this autonomous *self* separate from community and relationship is a new invention. He writes: “the term ‘self’ carries with it strong traces of the individualistic tradition. It suggests again the bounded unit, one that *interacts* with other distinct units. Further the *self* is a noun, and thus suggests a static and enduring entity” (p. xxvi). Gergen argues that, like Indigenous communities, the *self* is embedded in relating and one’s behaviour emerges from diverse relational contexts and learning that occur from our first breath. This view in turn emphasises the importance of empathy which extends to the land as well as humanity.

Jeremy Rifkin (2009) writes of a transition from an age of reason and faith to one of empathy. He argues that there has, in some circles, been a transition from “I think therefore I am”, as in Descartes’ mind centred understanding, to “I participate, therefore I am” (p. 153). The former undergirds the objective rationalistic approach of conventional Western research methodology which denies subjective experience. The latter undergirds a collaborative participatory approach, which affirms experience, and sensate observational stance. Such a transition “places empathy at the very centre of the human story – a place that it has always inhabited but a place which society has never fully acknowledged or recognized” (p. 153). Such an approach then means that “the act of thinking combines sensations, feelings, emotions and abstract reasoning in an embodied way” (p. 147). I have therefore explored the meaning of research based on empathic relating as a necessary precondition for participation.

The following two examples illustrate what empathy might mean for Aboriginal people.

I found the following story in the 1936 diary of G. M. McDougall, who was the wife of a missionary to the people at Kunmunya. She tells the story of her husband Walter’s accident with a gun. The story illustrates both a practical and emotional empathy which supports her, helps to save her husband’s life and announces (through a dream) his safe return. Key participants include the Rev J.R.B. Love, who helped form the Kunmunya Mission, and A. Capell, the anthropologist

who was visiting Kunmunya at the time. Her husband took two guns (a shotgun and a .44) and went to shoot a bush turkey. The story continues:

At the stock yard, he stopped to close up the gate for the donkeys. The guns slipped and hurt his sore finger and as he grabbed them, the .44 exploded and shot off his right thumb and forefinger. He fell to the ground and somehow damaged his face badly. The bullet went about one inch from his head, through his hat. Women screamed for me and I rushed out of school to see Mr Love supporting Walter. As I approached he covered his hand with his handkerchief—ever thoughtful.

Mr Love dressed the wound, and we got him to bed—he was quite cheerful but upset because of me. We guarded him all night but during Dr Capell's watch he had a dream and disturbed his hand. The bleeding began again (Unpublished 1936 diary of G. M. McDougall).

The reaction of the Aboriginal community was profound, with the men helping J.R.B. Love to prepare a runway for the new Flying Doctor Service plane "Kimberley" and also carrying Walter to the plane. The women were emotionally present for Walter's wife, crowding around the injured man, with tears streaming down their faces. As Mrs McDougall notes, "All very sorry for me". She writes:

Rebecca was standing crying and said, I'm sorry. "What for Rebecca", I asked. "I cry for boss, proper sorry, Johnnie cry too", Pudja-wola said, "We cry out bush for Mr Mac. Then one of the Aboriginal women, Dura-wola said that she dreamt that Mr Mac was home talking to Mr Love in the store and everyone was glad for him. Several days later, the mission heard the news that his condition was satisfactory and would soon be home (Unpublished diary: G. M. McDougall, 1936).

The second example is from a conversation with *Wiliggan* Elder Matt Martin. I had been speaking with him about what it meant for him to visit traditional lands. He stated: "You can feel it. Just like your home. You feel it in your heart and you can see the painting and you have someone there to talk the language. Like visitors who are coming for the first time. The spirit feel happy and they welcome you in with a good spirit". I replied that it is not only us who feel happy but the spirit feels happy too. Matt continued, "It has someone there who comes and visits them. We got the children out there to learn the spirit and the culture. Children some pick up the spirit. The spirit helps them to understand". Matt elaborated on what he meant by the spirit helping the visitor to understanding. He stated: "It is the country, the spirit of the *Wandjina* very strong. You can feel it



and it will bring you in. If you are a good man and go out to bush and be interested in what is law about country and thing and *Wandjinas*. It sort of brings you in, the spirit does that” (Recorded conversation, 10 July 2013).

These examples illustrate what it means for Aboriginal people to have empathy for their guests and for the land. In the first example, the people responded with deep listening to the needs of the injured missionary. Matt enlarges the meaning of empathy by speaking of his feeling for the land and the spirit of the land. He has an empathic connection with the land to the point that he believes his presence leads to the *Wandjina* feeling happy to have a visitor. These examples also illustrate the nature of empathy which involves deep listening and compassion. Aboriginal researcher Vicki Couzens defines deep listening as “our connectedness to nature and each other as part of the eternal cycle of life” (as quoted in Brearley, 2010, p. 37). As Capell noted above, the Aboriginal people treated the missionary as one of their own. They respond with deep listening through crying in the bush, listening to dreams and sharing from the inner Self. This is the quality of empathy that I try to emulate and express in my relating with the people of Mowanjum. Compassion reinforces the listening and, of course, the empathy. Compassion and its empathy transcend religious and cultural sectarianism and, as theologian Matthew Fox (1999) notes, is the marriage of social justice and mysticism. Each of these words/phrases – empathy, compassion and deep listening – challenges the prevailing Western tendency to separate and compete for the earth’s resources. Through compassion and deep listening I move from “a mechanistic and piecemeal universe to an organic and interdependent one” (Fox, 1999, 140). Such empathic relating changes the nature of research from a theory or action focus to that of the researcher participating in the inter-relationships that occur at many levels. Christopher Dunbar (2008) records a statement made during an Aboriginal research forum: “Every time research is done a piece of my culture is erased” (p. 91). Empathic relating guards against hurting the people and their culture through inappropriate research disconnected from the people’s way of knowledge and being.

My approach to research, therefore, assumes that relationship and the quality of relating are of utmost importance to the research, and that research should never be focussed simply on intended actions or on the outcome of the research relationship. In this respect, the inquiry is empathic: engaging in deep listening to the people and the land, compassionate to the needs of the people, with the intention of nurturing and transforming relationship, but vulnerable to over-involvement in their complex life issues.

## Response

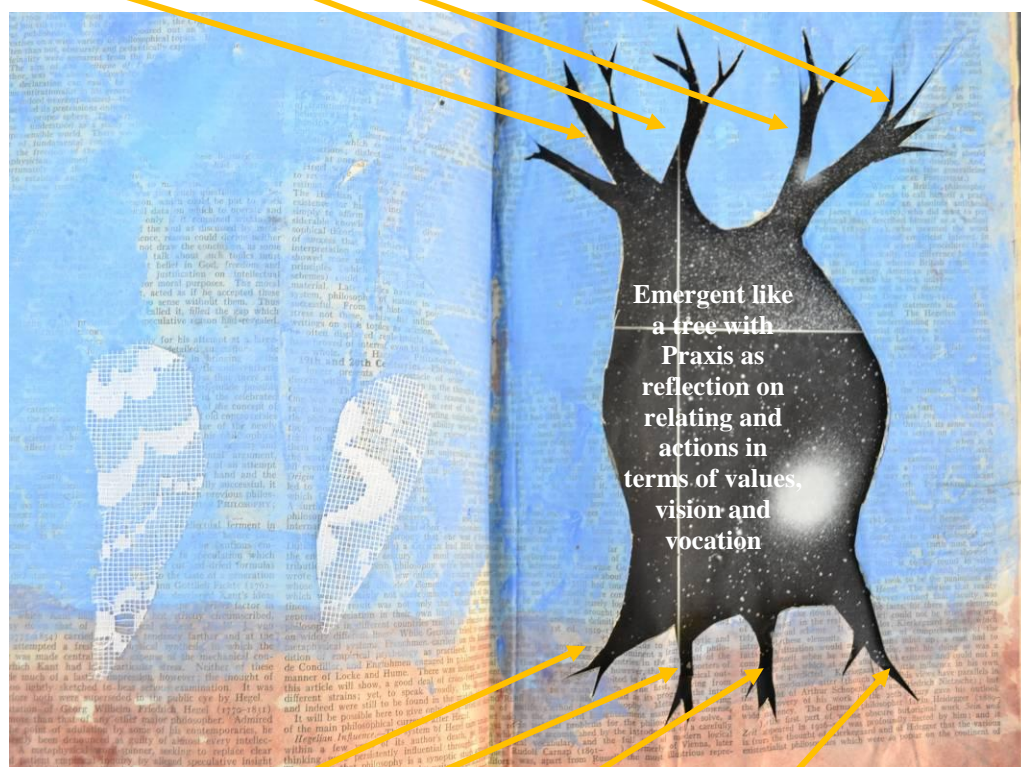
Although, I use the acronym PEER to distinguish and define research with an emphasis on relating and relationship, actions are involved. Such actions can be practical, organisational, relational and creative. Actions arise from those relationships which have been established over time. I participated in a number of journeys with families from Mowanjum (Majaddin in 2010 and Yalun in 2011). These set the scene for a deeper understanding of the importance of land and how we in the Boab Network could participate in their ongoing struggle to reconnect with their land. We are both guests and allies. Subsequent journeys to Poulton Pool and the return to Majaddin enabled us to understand the nature of action. In our return to Majaddin in 2012, we engaged in a variety of actions necessary for present and future returns to land. We learnt that action arises from a mature relating, rather than being imposed or pre-meditated. Such action occurs within an empathic relating, essential to ongoing and creative relationships with the people concerned. Indeed, we began to see the importance of peer relationships, critical to ongoing community development and transformation. In effect, as we nurtured such relationships, we opened ourselves to future possibilities, for effective action comes from healthy and appropriate relating.

Such response arises from the continuing reflection or praxis which underlies the inquiry. I not only reflect on actions but also on the nature of our emergent and transformative relationships. I have done this in terms of three major dimensions: values, vocation and vision. This praxis is central to my PEER inquiry, and has been open to inner leadings through dreams, creative expression as well as my immersion in the many conversations that I have had along the way. Through praxis I reflect on my cultural and educational background and the way this affects my knowing. Such background is radically different from cultural and educational backgrounds of the people of Mowanjum. If there were no preparation then I would only see and experience these journeys from a non-Indigenous academic perspective. The emergent nature of these four journeys was, in effect, a preparation in consciousness during which I made the intuitive leap to see things from a different perspective from my own culture. As I have experienced, particularly at Poulton Pool, Mowanjum people related to the land with a radically different understanding from my own, based on Western philosophical presuppositions. If I were to participate in their culture and land then I needed to be appropriately prepared!

Thus I developed the notion of PEER research as a refinement of PAR. I add the caveat that this research is particular to my experience and may not be universally applicable, for it reflects many years of involvement with the Mowanjum people which may not be easily replicated in other contexts. PEER research then is my way of affirming the importance of relating

and relationship in the research agenda. This is also true for the Boab Network, for we consider our first task is to nurture relationships and in so doing to join with the people as they engage with the issues that the community faces, including the difficult matter of youth suicide. We do not bring a program or particular expertise into this relationship or a specific community development agenda. Rather, we walk alongside the people and respectfully hold back those ideas about opportunities we see. We then wait for, or at times initiate, opportunities to prefigure the future. Through such long term relating, we create new opportunities together with the people, such as the computer centre and community garden. We would hope that such actions reflect the thinking and needs of the people of Mowanjum rather than being imposed by our Network, but acknowledge the continuing difficulty of communication and understanding.

**An empathic RESPONSE to:  
Mowanjum, Boab Network, ACU, wider community**



**The four roots: a participatory process of relating:  
Embedded process and methodology - as the path we took  
Guest (in a host/guest relationship)  
Ally (in a long term alliance)  
Empathic listener to people and land**

Figure 52: PEER and the metaphor of the Boab tree

PEER inquiry is the art and practice of empathically relating to the Aboriginal people and their lands. This is participatory in the larger sense of the researcher participating in an enduring relationship between the people and their lands and allowing his or her actions to reflect this relationship. This preparation is not only intellectual, as in wide-ranging reading, but intuitive (or delicately empirical, in Goethe's terms), where the researcher seeks to become one with the Other. This does not overlook their essential differences. On the contrary, it allows the inquirer to enter more fully into the differences to the point that his/her own ontology and epistemology are challenged and changed. In this respect, dreams and other means to foster an intuitive awareness become important.

## **Summary**

Through Bortoft (1996) I came to understand that I was developing (and concerned with) a different consciousness from the positivist consciousness based on subject/object separation. PEER affirms the emergent aspect of this participatory consciousness as new discoveries are made, not simply in the actions but in the relating and the implications of relating. The truth or wisdom is embedded in the relating and uncovered through intuition rather than analytic reasoning. I have introduced the idea of empathy to suggest that the inquirer enters that paradoxical state where he or she experiences oneness with the Other, but at the same time is acutely aware of difference and distinction. This awareness naturally leads to a response, not in the sense of trying to change others, but by being open to the call to engage in change with them. I certainly am changed through this relating and perhaps they are too.

The term PEER also picks up an important aspect of our work of relating: we are nurturing "peer" relationships which are critical to the future functioning of the Boab Network at Mowanjum. The journeys with Eddie and others have led to closer relations, greater understanding, and for me the acknowledgement that, as Eddie said, "You are one of us!" (Recorded conversation, Eddie Bear, 6 July 2013). I do not take this for granted, realising that there will always be a substantial difference between me as a non-Indigenous person and the community, but it is a extraordinary acknowledgement of what it has meant to nurture a "peer" relationship.

## **7.5 Sharing with those who are interested and/or involved**

An important aspect of PEER is my sharing or response with those who participated in this research. I shared not only with participants from Mowanjum and the Boab Network, but also with the University and the wider Australian community. This sharing has occurred and is

occurring in many ways throughout the research process as summarised in Appendix 1. It is one thing to write a thesis and think theoretically about the important issue of trans-cultural relating; however, it is necessary to share this knowing more widely if it is to have an impact.

I am aware that I risk over-action, particularly after insights received at Poulton Pool. Non-Aboriginal participants like me are prone to over-active involvement. This needs to be tempered with the other side, namely a “witnessing consciousness”. Such consciousness remains empathic. It is open to the involvement of my feelings as well as thoughts, and seeks to understand life from the perspective of the other person. But that is where it ends. My eventual response to the Mowanjum people may be to do nothing, and at an appropriate time to release myself from my involvement. I have to evolve consciously towards disengagement. I am not ready to do this at the conclusion of this research as I still have to finish Eddie’s family story which I agreed to complete as a gift of reciprocity. But even when I do, that relational connection will not end; it will merely transform into a new stage. I am part of the Boab Network which has indicated a long term and continuing relating with the community. It is important that I continue to relate in this wider Network and where appropriate with the Mowanjum people.

## **7.6 Response to my mentor, Eddie Bear**

It has been a privilege to work with Eddie Bear, who has contributed greatly to my research. He invited members of the Boab Network, including me, to his land on two occasions, as well as spent many hours reviewing the work of my research. He is a mentor to me and is a leader in his church and community. Eddie has been able to integrate his Christian faith and his Aboriginal culture, not only in seeing the relationship between key teachings and his cultural background, but in understanding that God comes to him through the land. He has also demonstrated the importance of faith in his work in his community. In 2012, Eddie won the Horizon Power Leadership and Innovation award (WA). This award recognises an individual who has achieved outstanding outcomes for Indigenous people. I have been fortunate and privileged to have had the opportunity to journey with such a person, who communicated his vision for Mowanjum and his own homelands (Majaddin).

I adopted a methodology which could be understood and appreciated by people such as Eddie (chapter two). I read through each chapter involving Eddie and checked with him whether he was agreeable to the words used. I also shared the findings of my research with him. As we discussed chapter three and the necessity for non-Indigenous people to be a guest in a host/guest relationship, Eddie agreed (Recorded conversation, Eddie Bear, 6 July 2013). He also hoped

people would read my thesis and understand the importance of this point. He restated: “The thing to do, not to go in there by your own will but to come in through us as the *Traditional Owners* of the land by being a guest coming into the place. And we have to ask you to come rather than you come in your own right”.

Eddie also restated the importance of keeping special places at Majaddin free of development: “I reckon that it is important to leave some places as they are. We can tread on their footprint now but some places we need to leave them as they is how they left them”. Eddie also spoke about the importance of returning once again to his land for an extended period of time. I would then hope to go with him to finish the book on his family history. I shared chapter six with him, focussing on the various issues that I had recorded. He agreed with my assessment of the difficulties. We talked about how we might approach these issues in the future, such as ensuring that no one goes off by themselves and that we check with him about taking children to waterholes. I shared how I saw my role as an intermediary. Eddie replied, “Yes, because you understand us more than they do. You see that and we have more time together and we talk about this stuff. That’s good to have somebody like yourself”.

Our conversations ended well. Eddie stated:

Like we got some blokes that want to take over. It’s on our land and we want to be responsible for it and saying what should happen. And maybe they have something good for us to take but we have to decide whether it is good for us. With you, you sort of wait on us, and you didn’t push your way in. You waited on us and then when we invited you in you are part of us now!

I replied, “Thank you”. We laughed together. Eddie then added: “I feel that way, you been part of us and been out there with us for a second time. It has been good working with you and I hope that this will go on”.

## **7.7 Response to the Boab Network**

My research has affected the work of the Boab Network, often in subtle ways, but sometimes more deliberately. I offer three major examples of how my work has influenced the Boab Network: in strategic thinking, in an event to honour a century of trans-cultural relating held at Mowanjum, and a seminar to “celebrate Mowanjum’s future” held in Perth.

## Strategic thinking

I shared my understanding of what it meant to be a guest of the people, as a critical concept for a Strategy Day which I facilitated at Floreat in July 2012. The meeting discussed the Boab Network's mission, objectives and underlying values. The people determined the following: "Our core value consists of basing our relationships on our developing understanding of our changing roles as guests as we affirm Mowanjum as our host" (Personal Journal, July 2012). The meeting also suggested two possible vision statements for further thought and reflection.

Vision statement 1: We will engage in a positive relationship with the community (children and adults) so that all facets of community can function in a cohesive and fulfilling way in the contemporary world. We dream of an empowered community reaching its dreams and fulfilling its needs.

Vision statement 2: To befriend the people of Mowanjum and through relationships and understanding of both cultures, together, build a better world.



Figure 53: Return to the hive

Both statements acknowledge the importance of relating as critical to any future collaboration. We have been privileged to enter into a relationship with the people, which is land oriented; that is,



many of us have had the opportunity to visit *up-country* and to begin to understand relationship from the perspective of Aboriginal people.

I was given the opportunity to share my research with members of the Boab Network again in August 2013. This led the Network to consider a schema for its program development and evaluation of programs. I presented a recommendation based on my research, to the committee responsible for the work of the Boab Network, together with the schema. Members of the Network met later in Perth to review their strategy, values and mission statement in the light of the schema. See Appendix 3 for the schema and a summary of ensuing conversations.

### **The Centennial Event at Mowanjum**

I had the opportunity, with the help of members of the Boab Network, to organise an event in May 2013 to mark a century of relationship between the church (Presbyterian missionaries and later Uniting Church in Australia) and the people of Mowanjum. I was particularly mindful of central issues raised in this thesis. For example, it was important to acknowledge that we were the guests of the people on this occasion and needed to consult with them at every opportunity, even though we were taking responsibility for key issues, such as catering. I also sought the guidance of the people to determine the nature of the event, noting that it was as much a grieving for the land that was lost, as a celebration of past and continuing relationship. To be an ally meant to take this grieving seriously and to help organise an event which would mark this grief in some significant way. Three Elders went with me to Old Mowanjum, a site that represented loss and the past. They chose a tree next to the demolished church that would be the appropriate place for a smoking ceremony. They poured out their hearts about the extent of the loss, and their words were incorporated into their speeches which they read out.

The written account of an interview which I did at the time (Appendix 4) served as the structure for a video intended to mark the occasion. My words flowed from an awareness of the issues involved arising from these journeys *up-country*. The wider actions such as the organisation of a centennial event and shaping a video followed as responses to my study.

### **Seminar: Celebrating Mowanjum's future**

In August 2013, I assisted the Boab Network with the organisation of a seminar to “celebrate Mowanjum's future” (Appendix 2). We were determined that the seminar not be a white dominated event, so we involved a number of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal speakers. We



had two speakers from Mowanjum who shared their understandings of the importance of culture and finding creative ways to return to land. This long term engagement and inquiry with the people of Mowanjum enabled me to support the speakers as they shared informally, yet within a structured interview approach.

## **7.8 A question of ethics: response to ACU**

Smith (2012) notes the importance, if not necessity, of positioning research within an Indigenous research agenda (p. 122). For Aboriginal people this has included land rights (p. 113). My research has naturally followed this agenda as I sought to embed my research in the local context. As I have discovered, my approach to ethics has needed to be rooted firmly in being the guest in a host/guest relationship as Aboriginal Elders such as Eddie Bear sought to return to their traditional lands. My host Eddie Bear has been in control of my project, in terms of what could and could not take place in this process and what would eventually be reported. I was therefore very conscious of Principles 10 and 12 of the AIATSIS (2011) ethics guidelines advocating the consultative nature of research, namely that such research should be of value to an Aboriginal community and accord with its needs and aspirations. The question that I consider below is how a human research ethics committee might recognise and assist development of a research proposal and process which comes out of my relating to the Mowanjum people.

I have resisted formality, not only in trying to establish formal links between the Mowanjum community and the ACU, but in establishing my own role as a researcher. I wore many “hats” in my work with Mowanjum and I certainly did not want to bring one particular discipline or role to my relationships with the people. However, there were times when I envied the anthropologist who clearly wore one major hat, with the clear support of his or her profession. In undertaking this research, I faced the difficult question of who am I and what role am I playing. I am a minister of the Uniting Church, but have been careful to set this role aside unless specifically asked. I have also donned the research role, a troublesome mask, for it comes with cost. The people are naturally suspicious of researchers. I ask myself, “What does it mean to research without being an authority: legal, anthropological, historical or theological?” I am caught in between. I am not Indigenous (as in Aboriginal) and therefore cannot even claim a right from that perspective.

I have also been very aware of problematic research experienced by communities such as Mowanjum who have given much and often received little. There is, therefore, the need for some sort of ethics process in order to protect the interests of Indigenous communities as well as other

vulnerable people and communities. However, I will argue that the pendulum/balance has swung too far and introduces additional formalities, not necessarily appropriate to an Indigenous community such as Mowanjum. The University's ethical requirements do not adequately account for the complexities of working with families from Mowanjum. Indeed, the issue that presented most problems was that of satisfying the ethical demands of my university. This proved difficult, as it entailed dealing with a language and ethos that is ontologically and epistemologically radically different to the language and ethos of the Mowanjum community Recent Indigenous scholars (see section 2.2) have reinforced the need for observance of the protocols of an Indigenous community. I have been aware of these protocols and incorporated them into my work with the people. I have also had to balance the requirements of the university with these relational protocols, which was not an easy task.



Figure 54: Shadow

I approached my research with the aim of recording my experience of the journeys, supplementing my experience with recorded conversations made on the journeys. Although I was able to document my own experience of the journeys, the recordings were problematic. I did not receive ACU ethics clearance to record any interviews in the initial journey to Majaddin in October 2011. I relied on my personal journal and supplemented it with recordings that I made later once I had ACU ethics approval. However, as my research process continued, I found that

the very concept of research jarred with what it meant to be with the Mowanjum people as we related to country.

The unease confirmed that I should not have a well-defined research methodology. Given the fluid nature of relationships with the Mowanjum people, I would allow the people to teach me what it meant to be in proper relationship with them. I would avoid imposing my understanding of how a research relationship should be. The first AIATSIS (2012) principle of ethical research supports this understanding: “Recognition of the diversity and uniqueness of peoples, as well as of individuals, is essential” (p. 5). I do not imply that the University should not have a well defined process. Mowanjum, as other Indigenous communities has experienced problematic research and researchers who have received much and often given little. There is, therefore, the need for an ethical process in order to protect the interests of Indigenous communities as well as other vulnerable people and communities. However, I will argue that the pendulum/balance has swung too far and introduces additional formalities, not necessarily appropriate to an Indigenous community such as Mowanjum. The University's ethical requirements do not adequately accounting for the complexities of working with families from Mowanjum.

I therefore set out on this journey without a clear map, and with confusion concerning my methodology in the traditional academic sense. In this way I sought to recognise the unique concerns, culture and ethos of the Mowanjum people. Indeed, this diversity also exists among the family groups within the community. I sought a number of principles which would guide me in this endeavour. These principles were essentially derived from Indigenous research methodology and understanding.

The principle of “Reciprocal and Respectful relationships” as outlined in chapter 2 applied in all parts of the process. It certainly affected the way in which I asked people for a conversation. I was conscious that being a researcher could act against establishing and maintaining good relationships. The people have a history of being over-researched and seeing little gain for their involvement. I had to take care in asking people for a recorded conversation. I also found that to hand people letters, as I was told to do, is very intimidating and needed to be handled carefully. I found that there was a right time and place for conversations, and I needed to be careful in the way I asked and when I asked. Indeed, I found myself reluctant to record conversations up country. By the second major journey of 2011, I found that I could not record conversations with Indigenous participants on the land. I felt that it would have been intimidating and destroy our sense of being on the land in a respectful way. I waited until the right opportunity presented itself after the trip. The key word for me has been respect. I was a guest in the homeland of the people

and therefore had to be respectful of both the protocols and my relationship with the Mowanjum people and the land. For example, I had been carefully worded up in the initial trip to *Majaddin* to avoid taking photos in sensitive cave sites.

Canadian Indigenous academic Nathalie Piquemal (2000) writes of four principles to guide research with Aboriginal communities: the need to establish a partnership before seeking such consent; researchers and participants must reach an agreement concerning the nature and purpose of the research; to confirm consent continually to ensure that consent is ongoing; and the provision of data to participants prior to the completion of the final report. I agree with her concern that research arises from a partnership and certainly approached my research in this way. However, I found it difficult to know what my research would entail, though this became clearer as the journey developed. I continually discussed the nature of my research with my major host and informant Eddie Bear and shared my data with him and others at the conclusion of the research. Mowanjum is an oral culture rather than written. This meant that I would read through the various parts of the thesis in their presence.

Human research ethics committees should understand that there are at least six fundamental assumptions in the university's ethical procedures which make it difficult to relate with an Indigenous community such as Mowanjum. It is necessary to recognise the distinctive nature of an Aboriginal community in order to develop and maintain an ethical relationship. In the following discussion, I question whether university ethics procedures and protocols actually support this intention.

**(1) That a researcher not talk with the community until the Human Research Ethics Committee has approved the application.**

This understanding seems to conflict with Principle 6 of the AIATSIS ethical guidelines (2012, p. 8), which assumes negotiation and consultation as a prerequisite of research. I was forced to ignore the advice that I not talk with the community until after its approval, not only because of the AIATSIS requirement but in view of my long established relationship with the community. I regarded the community as my final arbiter and saw my relationship with them as of high importance. It was necessary to talk with community members to establish possibilities. As I discovered, it is a "chicken and egg" situation. It is impossible to come to an effective research project without conversation and guidance with community Elders. Furthermore the problem at Mowanjum is whom to talk with, particularly when concerning land. I was reminded of this issue when an Elder reminded me that it was important to talk with the Traditional Owner of the lands

that I was visiting. My problem was that I did not know which area I would focus on. I spoke to those associated with the Mowanjum Arts Centre to alert them to the fact that I would be exploring my research. Then, when I had the opportunity on the 2010 *Majaddin* trip, I spoke with Eddie Bear, one of the Traditional Owners of *Majaddin*. I received his permission to undertake research *up-country* so I could then go to the university with some clarity. I included the 2010 trip in my thesis on the basis of Eddie Bear's consent as Traditional Owner to my documentation of this visit, but waited until I had the university's clearance before undertaking recorded conversations. I repeated this procedure when I was invited to take part in the 2011 visit to *Yalun*, speaking with Donny Woolagoodja who was responsible for the event at Yalun, and later that year speaking with the manager of the Arts Centre as we were undertaking collaborative work at Poulton Pool.

**(2) That a researcher will have a clear idea of the research procedure and methodology.**

I remember feeling quite uncomfortable when I had to fill out the ACU Human Research Ethics Committee review form. Among other questions, it requires research candidates to explain their research focus clearly and the methodology they will follow. All of these issues must be thought out because it is considered unethical to "go into the field" without approval from the university's research ethics committee. On the one hand, if I were to do what was considered ethical by the university's research guidelines, I had to give up on the whole idea of doing collaborative research. Indeed, how could I begin to "think collaboration" when everything had to be decided before I was supposed to meet with the people who would "collaborate" with me? I certainly agree with Piquemal (2000) when she states, "A lot of researchers plan to do collaborative research, but how much collaboration can there really be when everything has already been decided before meeting the research participants?" (p. 50). It was difficult to frame what I wanted to do, the number of participants and the methodology I would employ before I had the conversations that would enable me to do anything. Indeed, as I discovered, my process and methodology emerged from my relationship with the people. This would have looked thin when documented within a Western research framework. The AIATSIS (2012) guidelines assume an ongoing consultation and negotiation (Principle 8, p. 11), though I did not arrive at a formal agreement (Principle 9, p. 12). I did follow the university's guidelines to write appropriate letters, to be given to particular Elders and participants, indicating the extent and nature of my research. As I indicated at the beginning of this thesis, my approach was organic and responded to the opportunities that working with an Indigenous community offered. For example, I had no idea until after my initial trip to Mowanjum that I would be invited by Eddie to work with him to write his family story. I also had no idea that I would receive an invitation to attend the historic Native

Title Determination at *Yalun*. Both opportunities affected the methodology and outcomes of my research. I certainly was not framing a hypothesis in the traditional academic sense, conducting formal interviews in which the participants of my study would be answering a set of standardised questions. Indeed, my research was intentionally not framed by a series of questions arising from the reading of literature. This seemed too Western and ignored the fact that the questions would emerge from my journey with the people.

**(3) That a set of standardised letters and forms would contribute to an ethical journey with the community.**

A point not mentioned by Piquemal and certainly not appreciated by the ACU Human Research Ethics Committee is dealing with an oral rather than written culture. The letters which were carefully scripted to meet the requirements of the university's ethics committee may be inappropriate or worse in an Aboriginal context. I took the view that I would explain the intent of the letter and, if I were able, to leave the letter with the people for reading later or if they were willing to sign that we could engage in a conversation about the journey together. I also explained that I would not print anything which they were not comfortable with and stated that I would return for another signature to confirm that they agreed to what would be included in the thesis.

Letters were clearly an impediment at times and needed to be framed carefully within a relationship and dialogue with the people. In some cases, handing a letter to a participant was constructive and facilitated the research relationship, but for others it was clearly an impediment and an awkward beginning to the relationship. Carefully written letters are not necessarily the best form of communication because the Mowanjum community is an oral culture. As stated above, the community is very suspicious of research and organisations and a series of letters, no matter how carefully constructed, do exactly the opposite of what is intended by their use. I noticed on many occasions after interviewing both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, that my handouts would soon be "fluttering in the breeze".

**(4) That a university ethics committee can make decisions on behalf of the community, judging the worthiness of the project concerned, or its conformity to a set of principles far removed from the community.**

Principle 2 of the AIATSIS (2012) ethical guidelines affirm the need to recognise an Aboriginal community's right to self-determination and its right to protect its cultural heritage (Principles 3 and 4, p. 6). Yet the university ethics committee makes decisions without direct reference to an Indigenous community. I wonder if a more effective procedure could be designed,

particularly for those who have little or no prior contact with the community. Such a procedure would need to be designed to bring the community and its Elders more directly into the process. There is obviously a cost involved and the university should be considerate of such costs if it endorses its students' participation in remote communities.

Piquemal stresses that consultation with the relevant authorities may lead to two levels of consent. I was mindful that I had the consent of the Traditional Owner of the lands I visited, such as *Yalun* or Cone Bay, and the consent of those taking part in my conversations. I was also mindful that I would have limited access to traditional knowledge. Piquemal argues that researchers often end up going to a political authority rather than the owner of a traditional story or cave.

I have deliberately avoided researching community knowledge for this very reason. I am aware of the difficult and perplexing nature of this knowledge and I did not want to enter into this area. For example, apart from brief mention of my visits to sacred caves, I have not documented any stories or knowledge that were relayed to me. I wanted to focus on our mutual relationship, not on the knowledge that could be shared with me and others while visiting traditional lands.

#### **(5) That research is an ordered and intentional undertaking.**

Indigenous researcher Karen Martin (2008) discusses the research interface between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, likening it to the merging of the saltwater and the fresh water. In this “creative” mix, the *quampie* or mud oyster has the potential to produce pearls. In this respect research with an Indigenous community is a messy and ill-defined mix not unlike my own approach to research (p. 91). It is undesirable, if not impossible, to frame the research outline at the beginning of the process. It is more important to focus on issues of relating and relationship, which include sharing stories of relatedness. Tomaselli, Dyll and Francis (2008) reinforce this view, arguing that research with Indigenous communities challenges the Western theory which assumes the presence of order - clean, logical and coherent while looking for clear linear causality (p. 354).

#### **(6) That the “field of research” resonates with Western values and understanding.**

Martin (2008) notes that the marine mud in this saltwater/freshwater mix produces the irritants that make the oyster meat richer in taste. Certainly the ethics procedure was irritating because of its tendency to superimpose a Western framework on an Aboriginal setting. But I wonder if it should be more conscious of this irritant nature. Perhaps the ethics and research

procedure could anticipate the tension between two competing frameworks and design a process to deal with it, so that the final results become “richer” or more in keeping with the needs of the people.

Tomaselli, Dyll and Francis write of the requirement that illiterate informants sign release forms (2008, p. 350). This strips the encounter of spontaneity but also leads to the respondents losing control and a giving over of ownership in the process. Such words affirm my approach to obtaining information. I dutifully filled out a list of questions to ask respondents. I found these impossible to work with. In the end I avoided direct questions and did not regard our conversations as interviews. From Martin (2008) I learnt that direct questions are considered disrespectful and damaging to relatedness – and from experience. They are not part of the process of Aboriginal knowledge acquisition. As I have watched the Elders relate to their young, I have naturally concluded that the passing on of knowledge comes through the watching, waiting and the appropriate conversation. Again, Martin refers to her traditional knowledge by saying that going fishing requires knowledge of the fish, the currents and the seasons (p. 91ff). From this perspective, the involvement of an ethics committee is radically changed. Its initial task is therefore to ensure that research is embedded in the relationships and framework of the community and not seen as an intrusive event.

Accordingly, I suggest that the university adopt an ethical process which recognises the unique nature of Indigenous communities. Such a process should encourage and support researchers as they undertake initial conversations with such communities, recognising that these are part of the process. As in my case, the research question then comes from this interaction rather than from a review of relevant literature, or Western methodology. It is an inductive process based on relating with a specific Aboriginal community, rather than deductive process based on Western academic knowledge. Second, the ethics committee should recognise and support those who already have long term relationships with a community and not place them in the background. In such cases, the researcher is already bound by the protocols and relationships with the community.

The ethics committee wanted too much too soon! It should consider implementing and affirming a process between the researcher and community. The procedure might be a process beginning with a letter of introduction, carefully constructed to meet the particular requirements of the community concerned, as well as the relationship or lack of relationship between the researcher and the community. This would mean that the student’s first task is to talk with various members of the community about her or his research, with the aim of gaining their trust and



suggestions. As noted above, communication is an issue as are the standard forms of communication. If a letter is required, it needs to be carefully written in the light of community suggestions. Alternatively, a short oral or video presentation might be shown to prospective participants, again with the advice of the community. I would recommend the latter in a community such as Mowanjum, because the people are more used to verbal and visual presentations. Not surprisingly, I am aware that Aboriginal people place high regard in the nature of the person rather than simply what they are saying or have written or their position in a Western hierarchy.

The ethics committee might then focus, with the student, on the way in which this dialogue might be recorded. The aim is not to take a “cut and dried” proposal to the community but to begin conversation. The second phase is then to determine the requirements of the study and to identify particular community and external mentors for the student in the light of these requirements. At this stage a more formal but tentative proposal could be brought to the community and the ethics committee. The way in which this proposal is worded for many studies might be to allow some latitude to develop the proposal further, concentrating on the procedures of dialogue to follow along the way.

## **7.9 Sharing with the wider community**

I had the opportunity to undertake a number of exhibitions and talks concerning Mowanjum’s past, present and future (Appendix 1). These opportunities continued with an invitation to curate an exhibition of photos in Adelaide in 2014, together with talks and seminars. I do not want to recount these various presentations except for one that, like my relating to the Boab Network (section 7.7), has had an impact on my thinking.

I shared the stories of my journeys with participants of the Masters in Sustainability and Social Change program at OASES. I explored issues arising from native title with an OASES group in 2011. In 2013, I shared my thinking on PEER inquiry with another OASES group. The group helped me to refine the model outlined in section 7.2. A participant of the Masters group presented a summary of PEER in her presentation at the end of the year, introducing it as “our model” of PEER. I present the following refinements to honour her involvement and that of the group in my thinking process. I had highlighted the empathic connection in the relating, but the group went further to indicate that there was also a dispassionate dimension. I had included a praxis/reflective dimension in my thinking about Participatory Action Research. The group helped me to incorporate this dimension as the complement to Intentional Action and Inaction.

As illustrated in figure 55, PEER inquiry can be imagined as the interaction of two spirals: the response with the continual cycle of action and reflection and the empathic with its cycle of empathy and dispassion or stepping back from the relating. I determined from my journeys (particularly to Poulton Pool) that my response incorporated inaction as well as action, which is at one end of the response spiral. However, as the OASES group noted, this is balanced by being reflective (as in my understanding of praxis) and simply being, allowing the experiences of this inquiry to take shape within me without conscious thought or control. I had brought to the group my understanding of the importance of empathy in trans-cultural relating. The group introduced me to the necessity of dispassion, of detachment and stepping back from emotional involvement in a series of complex and often demanding relationships. This detachment will be important as I conclude my inquiry and the promised book for Eddie Bear and his family. These two spirals of empathy and response are set on a ground of participation, not unlike Participatory Action Research. However, as noted earlier in the chapter, my focus has been on the maturing relationships as much as the resultant actions. The resultant diagram is a like a flower, with its roots reaching into soil stemming from the centre of the plant (the embedded nature of the inquiry). In my thesis, this embedded inquiry has assumed the metaphor of hunting and gathering leading to the cooking and sharing.

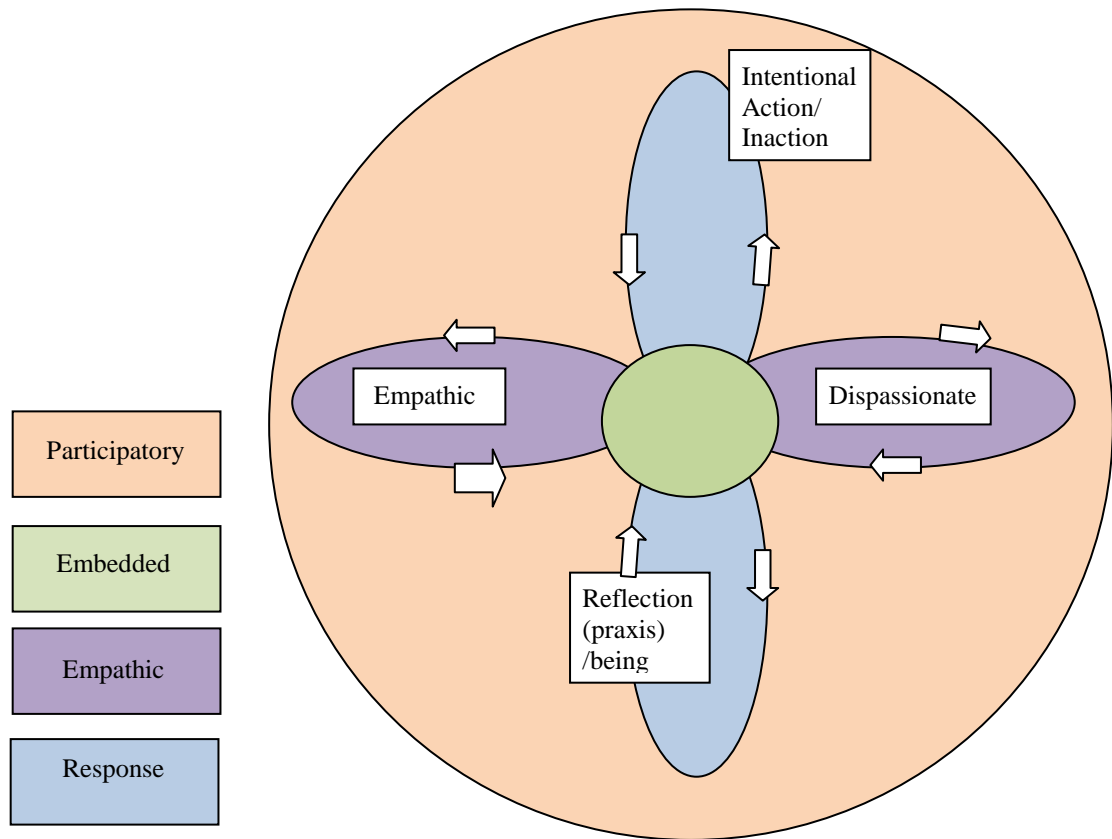


Figure 55: PEER Inquiry

## 7.10 Final reflections

It is difficult to find closing words for this research. Indeed, it feels like a never-ending story, and there are many more chapters to come, including finishing the book on Eddie Bear and his family. I began my work at *Majaddin* as I discussed the possibility of this research with Eddie Bear in October 2010. Since then, I have undertaken many journeys to Mowanjum and *up-country*. I was determined to explore Indigenous/non-Indigenous collaboration, though I still have trouble with the word “collaboration”. As argued in this thesis, the word is often project- or outcome-oriented, whereas members of the Boab Network, including I, have resisted an outcome driven approach to our relationship with the people of Mowanjum. We are working out a long term relationship involving many people in various trans-cultural relationships. This wide collaborative network has enabled very creative projects, hopefully with long term implications for the community and the Boab Network. I have therefore concentrated on documenting this relationship in one small arena of our overall collaboration, which has involved being an ally and being a guest.

I conclude my thesis with the voices of two people from Mowanjum, one current and one from the past. Mowanjum artist Kirsty Burgu reminds me of what it means to be an ally. When I spoke to Kirsty Burgu about trans-cultural relationships including reconciliation, she recounted the story of Pigeon to illustrate a person who fought for his people’s rights against white resistance. She added, “But dad told me stories of what they did. They would herd the black people like cattle over gorges. Old people right to little babies”. Kirsty then reminded me that times have changed. As she stated:

But you look Aboriginal people today have a voice. They can stand up for themselves. Not like before. I remember the *Worrorra* mob used to stand up; they used to fight all the European people that went there. They were strong people as well. But you think like the European mob they treated Aboriginal people as nothing. But today, you see them now, and they are equal, you know. But there are still some people who think...

I completed Kirsty’s sentence: “There are still rednecks around”, to which Kirsty reminded me that “They won’t get away with it this time. Yeah!” (Recorded conversation, Kirsty Burgu, 11 October 2011).

David Mowaljarlai (1993) reminds me of the transformation that occurs as I become the guest of his people and his lands. I received my original call from David Mowaljarlai when he

came to Victoria in the late 1990s and thus it is appropriate to give him the final word of my thesis. Mowaljarlai speaks of his beloved Kimberley, and writes of the land and his encounters with animals, trees, the river and all its gifts. He speaks of the transformation which comes through engagement with the land. I have felt a little of what he says and look forward for more to come.

You are looking at nature and giving it your full attention, seeing all of its beauty. Your vision has opened and you start learning now. When you touch them, all things talk to you, give you their story. It makes you really surprised. ... Then you put them in your storeroom, in the little room in your brains here. ... You are going off now, to see what the day will hold. You feel a different person. One more day is added to your life, you will be one day richer (pp. 53-55).

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### **Native Title Determination**

*Barunga v State of Western Australia*. [2011]. FCA 518

**Recorded Conversations- Robert Hoskin in conversation with the following people**

Arianda, Theresa. Derby, 10 October, 2011.

Barunga, Gordon. 11 July 2011 at Mowanjum.

Bakker, Keith. 3 July 2011 at Derby.

Bayley, Sam. 9 July 2013 at Derby.

Bear, Eddie. 13 July 2011 at Mowanjum.

\_\_\_\_\_. 4 October 2012 at Majaddin.

\_\_\_\_\_. 8 October 2012 at Mowanjum.

\_\_\_\_\_. 6 July 2013 at Mowanjum.

Bear, Marion. 8 October, 2012 at Mowanjum.

Boulet, Jacques, November 2013 , at Auburn, Victoria.

Breckon, Katie. 9 July 2013 at Mowanjum.

Burgu, Kirsty. 11 October 2011 at Mowanjum.

Burnett, Lee-Anne. 6 October 2011 at Derby.

\_\_\_\_\_. 10 October 2011 at Derby.

\_\_\_\_\_. 7 October 2012 at Derby.

Burnett, Lee-Anne & Gobby, Ross. October 2012 at Derby.

\_\_\_\_\_. 10 October 2011 at Derby.

Cameron, Norman. 29 May 2012 at Stratford Vic..

Croll, Peter . 9 July 2011 at Derby.

Dann, Robin. 4 October 2012, at Majaddin.

Gobby, Ross. 9 July 2011 at Derby.

\_\_\_\_\_. 6 October 2011 at Poulton Pool.

\_\_\_\_\_. 11 October 2011 at Derby.

\_\_\_\_\_. 6 October 2012 at Derby.

\_\_\_\_\_. 7 October 2012 at Derby.

\_\_\_\_\_. 14 October 2012 at Perth.

Martin, Matt. 10 July 2013 at Mowanjum.

Masters, W. December 2013, at Brighton Vic.

McOnie, Tessa, 8 October, 2012, at Derby.

Morlumbun, Joy . 9 October 2012 at Derby.

Obern, Ian. 13 July 2011 at Derby.

Oobagooma, Janet. 24 May 2011 at Yalun.

\_\_\_\_\_. July 2013 at Mowanjum.

Weeda, Libby. July 2013 at Derby.

Wilkie, Joanna. 9 July 2013 at Mowanjum.

Woolagoodja, Donny. 12 July 2011 at Wetlands near Derby.

## APPENDIX 1: Summary of action/sharing in respect of the journeys and inquiry

Date	Action/Description	Notes
October 2010	Presentation of paper to the ALARA conference Melbourne	A preliminary attempt to explain the significance of my collaborative relationship with Mowanjum people as part of the annual Mowanjum Arts Festival.
January 2011	Presentation of paper at a Restitutive Justice symposium at Swinburne University, Melbourne	I shared what it meant to attend and be part of the Native Title determination in May 2011.
June 2011	Presentation of paper to Limina conference in Perth on collaboration	The paper: <i>Beyond Collaboration, when place matters</i> was eventually published.
October 2011	Teaching at OASES, a post graduate school- presentation of the white cocky mask and performance	Videod a performance of White Cocky and his relationship with native title: a poetic and creative response to engagement with issues of native title and the importance of land.
July 2012	Strategy Day for the Boab Network	Facilitated the event, having prepared a paper on what it meant to be a guest of the Mowanjum people.
October 2012	Follow-up to requests from Majaddin traditional owners	Prepared a draft business plan for funding. Facilitated a special meeting concerning their land which involved a self-funded trip to the Kimberley. Searched out lost plans for <i>Majaddin</i> : found the current custodian
May 2013	Assisted Mowanjum people with organizing the event to recognise the centennial of relationship	The event was organized to bring attention on the importance of land, and the effect of displacement: through a <i>smoking</i> (remembering the past) at Old Mowanjum and exhibition of photos at New Mowanjum.
June 2013	Report to the Northern Synod and Congress of the Uniting Church- assisted with photograph exhibition at Parliament House in Darwin	Supported Mowanjum Elders as they presented a report on the Centennial Event. Informed the Administrator of the Northern Territory at Parliament House, the importance of land and culture to the people of Mowanjum.
August 2013	Assisted the Boab Network, Floreat Uniting Church to arrange seminar	Negotiated with and supported key Mowanjum Elders to present their views on the importance of land and culture for the future of Mowanjum. Organised an exhibition of photographs at Floreat Uniting Church.
September-November 2013	Talks at Habitat and Ivanhoe Uniting Churches Lecture at ACU Lecture for Adult Education	Arranged exhibition of photographs

January 2014	Remaining signatures for thesis	As in previous journeys I was involved in community and church business not part of the Thesis.
2014	March: Presentation at OASES April: Seminar in Perth May: Exhibition of historical photographs and seminar in Adelaide July: <i>Up-country</i> to Majaddin October: Offering lecture and seminar in Perth	These events give to me an opportunity to share my research with the wider community and in the case of the Majaddin trip to continue to work on the Bear family story (traditional owners).

## APPENDIX 2: Floreat Seminar to celebrate Mowanjum's future

### AIM OF THIS EVENT

The Mowanjum community, incorporating *Ngarinyin*, *Worrorra* and *Wunambal* language groups, recently acknowledged the centennial of their relationship with the Presbyterian and later Uniting Church in Australia. As part of this commemoration Floreat Uniting Church hosted a seminar exploring a range of key issues for Aboriginal people and their communities and our relationship with them. The day included presentations on the Mowanjum community and its history including an opportunity to hear personally from Mowanjum Elders. Other speakers considered the issues which impact on Aboriginal communities in Australia, including the modified preamble for the constitution, justice re-investment, education and the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal children. A photographic display of Mowanjum, its history and culture, accompanied the seminar.

#### PROGRAM

Friday 9 August

7.30 pm WELCOME TO COUNTRY

UC Congress. Music, Supper

Saturday 10 August

8.45 REGISTRATION

9.00 Welcome

9.15 Keynote Address: The Hon Fred Chaney

*The significance of a modified preamble for the Constitution.*

10.00 Morning tea

10.30 Hon Peter Collier Minister for Education and Aboriginal Affairs

11.00 Paul Bridge *Educational opportunities for Aboriginal children.*

11.30 Eddie Bear and Rev Dr Robert Hoskin

*The story of Mowanjum*

12.00 Assoc Prof Dawn Bessarab

Holistic wellbeing of Aboriginal Children.

12.30 Lunch

1.30 Tammy Solinec

The value of a Justice Reinvestment approach to criminal justice in Australia.

2.00 Mowanjum community members provide insights

The dream for the future of children of the West Kimberley.

2.30 Rev Andrew Watts – Kunmunya and Rev J R B Love

Lessons for the future.

3.00 Afternoon Tea

3.30 Q & A Panel - All Speakers

Chairman Rev Dr Robert Hoskin

4.00 Close:

Conversation, cheese and drinks

**Sunday 11 August**

9.30 Mowanjum Celebratory Church Service

10.30 Morning tea

11.00 -12.00 Q & A with Mowanjum Leaders

Chairman Rev Dr Robert Hoskin

## **APPENDIX 3: Mission statement of the Boab Network**

**Part 1: Recommendation to the Boab Network concerning evaluation of programs (as edited and developed further by Dr Richard Smith) presented to a special meeting of the Mission and Outreach committee of Floreat Uniting Church (See Part 2 for the process of the meeting).**

### **THE BOAB NETWORK'S MISSION**

#### **OUR OBJECTIVES**

To participate in the life of the people by the following means:

- 1 The work of the Boab Network to be grounded in the land and in the Mowanjum community's relationship with their land. We draw on six years (and more with individual members) experience of this relationship.
- 2 To recognise that the people have a unique and inseparable connection with this land. So we come as guests and acknowledge that they are hosts in their land.
- 3 The Church (both Presbyterian and Uniting) have always been mindful of this connection. Rev J R B Love thought it "unthinkable that the people be separated from their land". In recent decades members of the church (since the late 1960s) have been allies in the long term struggle to return to land and achieve native title. We in the Boab Network join in this struggle which is not only for land, but for justice and well being to ensure that the people "have a fair go."
- 4 The Boab Network, (unlike many government and social agencies) is able to take an empathic approach in its long term relations with the community. This empathic approach stems from being invited to respond to the needs of a community struggling to make sense of and to deal with the impact of youth suicide and high incarceration rates. In the ensuing years, we have cared for, and related to the children and youth thus empathically involved in their lives and their needs. Such an empathic approach involves deep listening both to the land and to the people of the land.

#### **OUR VALUES**

Our values are based on following the Aboriginal way carefully negotiated with the community and "gestated" as in any birth. In this respect the Boab Network engages in an ongoing *Praxis*, which means reflection on our actions, relating, and experience in the light of our values, our vision and our vocation.

We are an ecumenical based network and thus these three reflect the different theological approaches and understandings of our members, and of course the people of Mowanjum. Such theology must of necessity take into account the relationship between the *Wandjina* and people expressed in their inseparable connection with the land.

- 1 We are concerned that the people of Mowanjum have a “fair go” as any Australian. This has not been the case in the past as people have been disenfranchised, given inferior housing and other resources and faced persecution in overt and covert ways. Sadly, they continue to be disadvantaged. The next generation of children must have access to all the basic services and support that children in the white community receive.
- 2 We are also concerned that the people be empowered: that is the purpose of our programs is not to remove their responsibility, and continue their dependence, but rather to empower them to stand tall within Australian society. In this respect we seek to nurture healthy, independent relating and are alert to our own practice which may be otherwise.

## **OUR VOCATION:**

The Boab Network is a Church sponsored organization, though with many members who have little or no association with the church. We do not use traditional God language to describe our call (our vocation). However, many of the members of the Boab Network feel a personal call to relate to Aboriginal people and stand with them in their struggle for justice.

## **OUR VISION**

We avoid being caught up in the difficulties of the present, and the wider media stress on the disintegration of Aboriginal society rather than its transformation. We seek to be a people of vision, moving with the people toward a community which exhibits the very best of Aboriginal and the wider Australian culture. Our programs are designed with this in mind, seeking to enhance this desire for transformation and creative life.

The Boab Network thus will continually reflect on its work and relating in a variety of ways through conversations between its members and with the community, by regular email and other personal communications, through seminars and other special events, and in reviews of each of its programs.

## **RELATIONAL NETWORKS**

This branch has two branches, one being our relating with the people of Mowanjum and the other being our relating to many networks within Derby, Perth and wider.

The Boab Network has sought to develop long term relationships with the people of Mowanjum: with children, youth and adults. This relating forms the basis of all our programs for we are responding to the people of Mowanjum and their stated needs rather than imposing our will upon them.

The Boab Network also seeks to relate to many networks within the wider community. We recognise that the issues that a community such as Mowanjum faces, involve many networks in the wider Australian community. It is therefore imperative that the Boab Network continually reach out to these Networks at times advocating for and with the people of Mowanjum.



## **ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES**

One of the key strengths of the Boab Network is its ability to bring many people together to relate to the people of Mowanjum to organize programs. There is always a tension between over-organization and therefore acting against the wishes of the Mowanjum people. But the Network seeks to keep this in check by ensuring that such organization is achieved through long term consultation and where possible the involvement of the Mowanjum Elders.

The Network has a history of successful grant applications leading to the funding of our long term program for children and youth, the computer and garden centres, and recently, the Pastoral Station.

## **PRACTICAL**

The work of the Network is intensely practical: whether in supporting Mowanjum people who come to Perth for medical reasons, setting up the Resource centre, renovating the Derby Hub (an educational centre), or supporting the families as they return to land.

## **CREATIVE**

The Boab Network seeks to engender a creative response to the needs of the Mowanjum people. In this respect, we have sought to involve creative artists who have explored the strength of using visual and performance art *up-country*, within Mowanjum and in visits to Perth.

## **IN SUMMARY**

### **Our achievements to date have been:**

- A clearer understanding of what it means to support the community as they return to land,
- A close and supportive relationship with children and youth engendered by a regular holiday program,
- Successful developmental projects such as the Hub in Derby for young mothers and children and within Mowanjum, the garden and computer centre with internet which have been recognized by the wider community,
- Development of a proposal to extend to Computer and Internet Centre to other remote Communities along the Gibb River road to support the return to country.
- Assisting with obtaining a sizable grant for the development of the pastoral station, to provide employment and a TAFE training centre.
- A series of events in 2013 to remember a century of relationship between the Mowanjum people and the Presbyterian/Uniting churches
- Youth visiting and subsequently undertaking secondary education in Perth,
- The capacity to call on a wide variety of people and Networks within Perth, Derby and further afield such as illustrated in the recent Seminar.

- The Boab Network is not complacent and seeks to explore new possibilities with the people of Mowanjum. In this we recognize that the development of programs relies on the formation and nurture of peer relationships that extend over years. We seek to continually nurture these relationships as we grow as an organization within the wider Uniting Church seeking to embrace all denominations and groups working towards the welfare and benefit of the Mowanjum people.

## **Part 2: SUMMARY OF THE PROCESS OF ARRIVING AT THE BOAB NETWORK MISSION STATEMENT**

In September 2013, I had the opportunity to share my research with members of the Boab Network at Floreat Uniting Church. I offered a Powerpoint presentation using images from my Altered Books to recount the methodology that I had used and the four journeys. Members of the Network had experienced some of these journeys and commented from the perspective of their personal involvement. Major issues discussed included the word empowerment. Do we actually empower the people or is it a fallacy to think that we have any control in this matter? The role of the Boab Network in activity listening to the people was discussed together with the importance of assisting people as they returned to country. Several members acknowledged the part that my work had played in the philosophical underpinnings of the Boab Network and its approach to its work with Mowanjum people.

I had also tabled a document for discussion which was distilled by Richard Smith into a formal report (See Appendix) with the Motion:

Do we adopt as the basis for Boab Network's Mission Statement - Robert Hoskin's Boab Network Metaphor?

The meeting was held later in September with the following outcome (see Part 3).

## **Part 3: The Boab Network Mission Statement (arising from the meeting held 11 September 2013)**

**OUR VISION:** To move forward/ walk empathically with the people of the Mowanjum community.

### **OUR OBJECTIVES**

1. To come as guests to the land of the Mowanjum people who are our hosts, recognising the unique and inseparable connection of the people of Mowanjum with their land.
2. To develop a long term relationship with the peoples of Mowanjum for the benefit of their community.

## **OUR VALUES**

- We acknowledge and draw upon our background in the Christian tradition.
- We honour the strength, independence and culture of the people of Mowanjum.
- We commit ourselves to developing more just, inclusive and equal relationships that recognise the place of First Peoples.
- We seek to be inclusive of those who share our commitment to the Mowanjum people
- We commit to a process of reflection on all that we do.

## **STRATEGIES**

- To celebrate the land, culture, language and community.
- To build strong and equal personal relationships
- To recruit skilled contributors to undertake agreed projects.
- To promote meaningful learning from the very early years.
- To promote a community environment for a healthy lifestyle

## **APPENDIX 4: Interview for a video concerning the centennial event.**

### **INTERVIEW FOR VIDEO: Robert Hoskin**

#### **The Centennial of Relationship between the people of Mowanjum and the Presbyterian/Uniting Churches**

Having given a summary account of the Centennial and how it came to be I was asked to explain the nature of the celebration. I replied:

Celebration is the wrong word. It has been as much a mourning of the past as a celebration of the past. Certainly it is a celebration of that magnificent relationship between the church: the missionaries and the people. But it is a mourning for the fact that they are in alien land, that government pressure forced them to shift to this place of Derby.

It was significant to go back to old Mowanjum. It was an unfortunate time. In the original plan old Mowanjum was to shift to New Mowanjum in three years. But as it turned out they had to move in just about a week end. So that they had to leave their church, their buildings everything and overnight establish themselves in a new place. With that, I don't think as I have heard there was a recognition of that move. It happened!

In the time between then and now the place has been like an archaeological dig. It was incredibly important to take three Elders out there last year and to choose the place where we would do the smoking. And I think that it was Janet who made the choice to do the smoking next to the old church. Because they lost their place of worship. The church was demolished and with it the *Wandjinas* on the wall, the cross and the roof, everything was taken.

So it was very important to go back to that place and do a smoking. And as Andrew deftly explained in his prayers took us to the point of seeing this as a prayer of confession.

So that we were all able to be there, to acknowledge it and to let it go.

For me, with the stories, that was a magnificent moment but a very painful one.

I am seeing a community in a paradoxical situation. They are under threat but also have great hope. It is dealing with that tension. In terms of being under threat, it has been under threat for many years if not for decades. They are at the edge of town, they are susceptible to alcohol, loss of work, the prison is just down the road. It reminds people of where they might end up if they get into trouble. So as an Aboriginal community it is like many Aboriginal communities across Australia, under threat. And I fear for the future, for the children, in particular the youth and indeed, my next task this week is to take a funeral for someone who hung himself. And last year, it was described as the suicide epicentre of Australia.

So the threat is real and powerful. But there are magnificent moments of hope for that community and where I see the hope is there are programs established – there is a community centre which has a computer resource centre – the building is being enlarged. And it is enlarged because people are taking it up. And there is this interplay between their culture and western culture. That is happening and it is having enormous implications for the future in terms of education and employment too. At the same time there is the re-instigation of the Pastoral Station. It is very important that people deal with land and their home at the moment is this land, near Derby so to have the pastoral station coming back alive is a magnificent form of hope. At the same time both in the *Ngarinyin* camp and in the *Worrorra* camp in particular is the return to land. And for the three tribes, the *Wunambal* as well there is the native title right across the Kimberley. So with native title there comes the responsibility to care for, nurture and relate to the land. And with people like Donny Woolagoodja training new people in terms of tourist industry and rangers I see that is a form of hope.

I see Eddie Bear and his family going back to *Majaddin*. And with it the education of the young and with it the restoration of that connection with the land. Now that is two of a number of different examples. The people are not simply resident in Derby, but they are resident in their own lands, their connection to the *Wandjinas* the caves and the *ungudd* which add incredible meaning to their lives. Then in terms of hope for the future, as people take this up then they have the two cultures. David Mowaljarlai who is now deceased always thought in terms of the two laws, the two situations, the two cultures and bringing the best out of both. Where I see Mowanjum has got hope it does do this. And we saw this during the weekend. We remembered the pain of the past and present, yet we saw the *junba* and in the *junba* we saw the young coming on and the artistic work that Leah did was magnificent.

If we look carefully at their bodies we see the culture come alive not merely in the song and the dance, but in their bodies as well: the way that their bodies are marked. That is an incredible form of hope. It is taking care for the future, but also as I have said before it is linking that with the Western culture in terms of computer and other skills. And it is this total picture that is emerging not just part of it.

(What has been particular about this weekend is Mowanjum?) Because it is far north Western Australia Mowanjum could regard itself as cut off from the rest of Australia and the Church. What has been special and particular about this weekend is that the church has come to Mowanjum. It is very important that the people have been hosts. In a strange way they have been guests in their own land. The missionaries came in as guests then soon became hosts. And the closer that they came to Derby the more the missionaries became the host. The people became the guest. So what is special about this moment is that the people regain their strength to be hosts to the church at large. And this is an affirmation and this is a gathering together of the resources of the community to be the host in their own land. Be it in alien land, but they have still claimed it for their own. The new ones are born here. So as Janet said, this is our land as much as any other part of our traditional lands. But they are hosts and that is important!

## APPENDIX 5: Script of the White Cocky Performance and Artist Statement

### ARTIST STATEMENT:

Robert Hoskin  
White Cocky and native title  
Paper, Cardboard and Plastic

What does it mean to journey with the Aboriginal people of the Kimberley as they engage native title? Over the last two decades the *Ngarinyin*, *Worrorra* and *Wunambal* peoples of the Kimberley have sought native title in respect of their traditional lands. The *Ngarinyin* people were granted native title several years ago and the coastal peoples, *Worrorra* and *Wunambal* received this recognition last May.

I had the privilege and opportunity to attend this important occasion which occurred on a remote part of the Kimberley Coast called Cone Bay (*Yalun*). Some one hundred and fifty people attended the determination coming by sea plane, helicopter and boat.

Since then, I have interviewed a key Elder about his understanding of native title. He shared difficulties that are yet to be resolved, namely what does it mean for his people and what does it really offer?

From my brief reading of the literature, I agree with his concern. *Mabo* succeeded in gaining native title determination despite huge challenges from the community and government. Since then, Federal Government legislation and court rulings *have comprised* the original vision. White cockatoo has had his way!

I donned the white cocky mask in our *Mythmaking* group. The feathers of the mask were cut from a racist book of the mid-sixties talking about Aboriginal culture. I was taking on the worst aspects of white society. To don the mask is to take on this terrible persona. I acted out the script below.

### White cocky and native title

White cocky  
You look so pretty in the mirror  
White feathers, glistening in the sun  
What darkness hides in your cloak?  
What violence follows in your flight?

Once upon a time  
Cocky had a vision  
He would explore, conquer  
He would be pioneer in Terra Nullius  
Land of no people, no people within his land.  
(Cocky places the artwork in the centre)

And he set forth  
Creating havoc wherever he went  
Destroying lives  
Taking from the many  
He fashioned his dream on a bed of lies.  
(Cocky tears up photographs)

But dreams can fade, and lies found out  
The people's cry would one day be heard  
And it happened  
One moment later the truth was told  
This land was the peoples the people were the land.

(The words *native title* are placed in the centre together with the Black Cocky)  
Cocky was shocked,  
Angry, confused  
He sent for the eagles  
And fashioned new laws,  
New barriers,  
Fences to protect his new found rights.

One by one, the lights went out,  
But not even  
Not even Cocky could hide from the truth.  
One day  
He would see himself in the mirror  
Resplendent in his finery  
But covered in lies! (Cocky pauses with the mirror)



## APPENDIX 6: Ethics letters and consent forms



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<http://www.acu.edu.au>

### **INFORMATION LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS 'Up Country' Collaboration Project**

PRINCIPAL SUPERVISOR: Dr. Noah Riseman

STUDENT RESEARCHER: Dr. Robert Hoskin

PROGRAMME IN WHICH ENROLLED: PhD

Dear Participant,

You are invited to participate in a collaboration project which is part of my studies at the Australian Catholic University. I intend to document several trips up country with your help and participation. I want to tell the story of visits to traditional country in the context of Mowanjum's unique artistic and cultural history. This story which will be documented by photography and video will be available to the community for its permanent record. The collaborative process will be documented through conversations, and interviews in addition to the above photographic and video record. It is hoped that this will be an enjoyable and enriching experience for you and I as we travel together.

If you agree to be part of this collaboration, you will be interviewed and asked if you are willing to be included in the photographic and video presentation. It is important to realize that the project and the participants will be recorded both photographically and by video. If you wish not to be photographed or videoed, I will respect your wishes. I will also withdraw any images or conversation previously agreed upon if requested. As the project will take several years to complete, please feel free to withdraw at any time without needing to give a reason for withdrawal. You do not have to justify your decision, and can withdraw, if you wish, your consent to any recorded conversations being used in later reflections. However,

once the thesis is in print, it will not be possible to withdraw photographs, conversations or video material.

This project offers you and your community an opportunity to present your unique relationship with country in a wider context. It will also provide an important cultural and historical record for your community to be kept in the new museum at the Arts Centre. In general, this project will make a significant contribution to understanding the process of collaboration between people from Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultural backgrounds. It will suggest a variety of ways of both interacting and speaking across and between cultures. I will happy to discuss this invitation with you further. My mobile number is 0408 307361 and email address is [reh1@bigpond.com](mailto:reh1@bigpond.com). Alternatively, you may also wish to contact Naomi Wolfe, the Academic Co-ordinator of Jim-baa-yer Indigenous Unit, Centre for Indigenous Education and Research (Phone: 03 9953 3839, Email: [naomi.wolfe@acu.edu.au](mailto:naomi.wolfe@acu.edu.au)).

Please note that this study has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at Australian Catholic University. In the event that you have any complaint or concern about the way you have been treated during the study, or if you have any query that the Investigator has not been able to satisfy, you may write to the Chair of the Human Research Ethics Committee care of the nearest branch of the Research Services Office:

Chair, HREC  
C/- Research Services  
Australian Catholic University  
Melbourne Campus  
Locked Bag 4115  
FITZROY VIC 3065  
Tel: 03 9953 3158  
Fax: 03 9953 3315

Any complaint or concern will be treated in confidence and fully investigated, and you will be formally informed of the outcome.

If you agree to participate in this project, you should sign both copies of the Consent Form. Please retain one copy for your records and return the other copy to me.

I look forward to your participation in this project,

Dr Robert Hoskin

Dr Noah Riseman

Student Researcher

Principal Supervisor



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<http://www.acu.edu.au>

## **PERMISSION FOR RESEARCH**

### **'Up country' Collaboration Project**

PRINCIPAL SUPERVISOR: Dr.Noah Riseman  
STUDENT RESEARCHER: Dr. Robert Hoskin

Dear

I am undertaking studies at the Australian Catholic University with particular focus on the issue of Indigenous and non-Indigenous collaboration. As you are aware, I have been collaborating with the people of Mowanjum for many years in helping with the Mowanjum Festival and other activities.

I ask for permission to document several trips up country with your help and participation. I want to tell the story of visits to traditional country in the context of Mowanjum's unique artistic and cultural history. This story which will be documented by photography and video will be available to the community for its permanent record. The collaborative process will be documented through conversations, and interviews in addition to the above photographic and video record. I would also appreciate your help and guidance as the final narrative is written and compiled for inclusion in my thesis. I would want to present a document that is a faithful record of the journey, but also sensitive to cultural matters.

I will interview some of the adults who participate in the 'Up-country' trip, asking their permission. I will also ask whether they are willing to be included in the photographic and video presentation. If they wish not to be photographed or videoed, I will respect their wishes. As in previous trips, I will be very sensitive to photography around sacred sites and will follow your guidance. In any respect, we will show the video and photographs to those

participating before they are publicly used as part of the exhibition or included in my doctoral thesis. However, once the thesis is in print, it will not be possible to withdraw photographs, conversations or video material.

This project offers you and your community an opportunity to present your unique relationship with country in a wider context. It will also provide an important cultural and historical record for your community to be kept in the new museum at the Arts Centre. In general, this project will make a significant contribution to understanding the process of collaboration between people from Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultural backgrounds. It will suggest a variety of ways of both interacting and speaking across and between cultures.

I look forward to talking with you further about this project and address any concerns that you might have.

With kind regards,

Robert Hoskin



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### CONSENT FORM

TITLE OF PROJECT: 'Up country' Collaboration Project

PRINCIPAL SUPERVISOR: Dr. Noah Riseman

STUDENT RESEARCHER: Dr. Robert Hoskin

I ..... (*the participant*) have read and understood the information provided in the Letter to Participants. Any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in conversations and other discussions during our 'up country' journey. I also realize that I may be videotaped and photographed in addition to a record of conversation. I realise that I can withdraw my consent at any time with the limitation that I will not be able to withdraw after the Thesis is published.

I hereby DO / DO NOT request to be referred to by pseudonym. I am aware that there is a risk that even a pseudonym will not protect my identity completely.

NAME OF PARTICIPANT: .....

SIGNATURE ..... DATE .....

SIGNATURE OF PRINCIPAL SUPERVISOR .....

DATE .....

SIGNATURE OF STUDENT RESEARCHER.....

DATE:.....



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### CONSENT FORM

TITLE OF PROJECT: 'Up country' Collaboration Project

PRINCIPAL SUPERVISOR: Dr.Noah Riseman

STUDENT RESEARCHER: Dr. Robert Hoskin

I ..... (*the participant*)

DO/DO NOT agree to be included in a record of the group process and conversations that may be published.

I hereby DO / DO NOT request to be referred to by pseudonym. I am aware that there is a risk that even a pseudonym will not protect my identity completely.

I hereby DO / DO NOT grant the researcher permission to deposit materials related to my interview in the Mowanjum Art Centre.

NAME OF PARTICIPANT: .....

SIGNATURE ..... DATE .....

SIGNATURE OF PRINCIPAL SUPERVISOR .....

DATE .....

SIGNATURE OF STUDENT RESEARCHER.....

DATE:.....